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# **One month before Covid-19 and one year after: An assessment of wellbeing of post-primary school leaders in Ireland.**

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## 1 Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused chaos in Education worldwide (UN, 2020). For some, it was “like a rug had been pulled from under” them (L. E. Kim & Asbury, 2020), others described it as a collective grief and trauma (Brown, 2020; Crosby, Howell, & Thomas, 2020), as well as constant struggle, yet the crisis has also brought about perceived growth, personal as well as professional development, and positive transformation (Burke & Arslan, 2020; Dempsey & Burke, 2020; Waters et al., 2021). The resilience with which school leaders embraced the hurricane of Covid-19 that swept education, was particularly remarkable in the early stages of the lockdown (Beauchamp, Hulme, Clarke, Hamilton, & Harvey, 2021; Burke & Dempsey, 2020). Devoid of any precedent on how to cope with the lockdown-related school closures, and burdened with the impact of the digital divide (Doyle, 2020; Mohan et al., 2020), they kept going ensuring that teaching and learning was maintained throughout.

The impact of the pandemic on individuals varied depending on factors, such as their attitude towards the government, the time during which their wellbeing was measured, the amount of time they spent engaging in physical activity, or respondents’ profession and their proximity to people diagnosed with Covid-19 (Choi et al., 2021; Lades, Laffan, Daly, & Delaney, 2020; Otu, Charles, & Yaya, 2020; Sibley et al., 2020). At the same time, when the Leaving Certificate students’ wellbeing pre-pandemic was compared with the wellbeing of students doing their exams during the pandemic, only a few differences were found that related mainly to their experiences of positive emotions and physical health (Quinn, McGilloway, & Burke, 2021). Similarly, a study carried out across 78 countries demonstrated that despite the pandemic, 50% of respondents reported good mental health and further 40% high levels of psychological flourishing (Gloster et al., 2020; Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021). Therefore, as destructive as Covid-19 was, it did not result in a global decline in wellbeing, as predicted. Although further research is required with larger samples and more comprehensive measures of wellbeing to confirm this finding.

Nonetheless, the pandemic highlighted the deeply ingrained inequality in societies worldwide. Households most affected by the devastating effects of the pandemic were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Kira et al., 2021). For many families of children with special needs, it was a source of additional stress and decline in wellbeing (O’Sullivan et al.,

2021). Women's wellbeing was also more affected by the pandemic than men's, as their "triage" working and mothering resulted in constant fire-fighting at all fronts (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021; Dempsey & Burke, 2021b; Flynn et al., 202; Hoyt, Cohen, Dull, Maker Castro, & Yazdani, 2021). These are some of the social inequalities that may explain the disparities between groups in the way Covid-19 affected their wellbeing.

In Ireland, the wellbeing of primary school leaders was measured a year after the pandemic began and showed lower levels compared to the general public (Burke & Dempsey, 2021b). Furthermore, leaders whose wellbeing was maintained at higher levels engaged in unique behaviours, such as delegating, attending professional development events, and having positive outlook (Burke & Dempsey, 2021a). While the previous study with post-primary school leaders identified a range of challenges they had to cope with at the early stages of the pandemic, little is known about the impact of them on participants' wellbeing (Mohan et al., 2020). Therefore, the main aim of the current study was to identify the difference in post-primary schools' wellbeing before the pandemic and after. The additional research questions related to leaders' experiences of the lockdown from a perspective of time (1 year after the initial school closure), as well as their views as to the future of post-primary education post-Covid-19.

When Covid-19 hit, policy makers were forced into crisis management and the environment for decision making was in constant flux. This led to a breakdown in communication at times and this increased pressure on the leaders in second level schools as they negotiated new ways of working. In March 2020, they had to lead schools in providing distance education, they then had to lead a changed assessment system of calculated grades in May 2020 (DES, 2020). Then in September 2020 they had to manage the safe opening of their schools and implement Covid-19 protocols. At the time of this survey, January 2021, they were back managing distance education for their students. Priestley and colleagues (2021, p.275) illustrate "the multilayered and rich ecological environment of education". They show how the sites at all levels<sup>1</sup>, actors and activities are all interconnected. In a system such as this, clear communication between sites such as the macro site where policy makers such as the

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<sup>1</sup> Sites such as, Supra (OECD, world bank), Macro (policy makers, agencies, politicians), Meso (brokers such as the JCT, PDST, NAPD), Micro (leaders, teachers), Nano (students). Sites are not distinct, and borders are blurred and there are multi-directional flows of influence (Priestley et al., 2021).

DE and HSE are located, is imperative. The DE as part of the macro site communicates with the micro leadership and teacher site which in turn impacts the nano site, that of the classroom, student and parents. The leader in this way acts as a knowledge broker between the policy maker to others in the school community. This is a complex role.

## 2. How was the study conducted?

This report consists of two studies. The first study was an online survey sent out to post-primary school leaders via NAPD in January/February 2020, i.e. one month before the Covid-19 outbreak in Ireland. The second study was an online survey sent out to post-primary school leaders via NAPD half-way through the school year 2020/21, i.e. one year after the first study. Both, surveys comprised of a mixture of alternate-choice, multiple-choice, rating scale and open-ended questions from which quantitative and qualitative data derived. Two psychological scales have been used to assess leaders' wellbeing (MHC-SF and the Workplace PERMA Profiler). SPSS version 26 (2019) was used to analyse quantitative data. A series of descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to do it. MAXQDA (2020) was used to analyse qualitative data. Thematic analysis and content analyses were applied to do it.

In the second survey, apart from questions relating to descriptive data, a series of questions were asked relating to leading post-primary school communities during Covid. They included such questions as how often school leaders took a break (morning break, lunch) the response to which they rated on a scale from 1 (every day to never) and how often the school leaders took off-the-job breaks (over the weekend and during the school closure). Also, "How much stress have you experienced during this school year?" rated on a scale from 1 (a little) to 3 (a lot).

Wellbeing in the two studies was measured using two psychological scales MHC-SF (C.L.M. Keyes, 2009) and Workplace PERMA profiler (Kern, 2014). They identified two perspectives on wellbeing.

### MHC

The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (Corey L. M. Keyes, 2002) was used to assess participants' wellbeing, which is based on a three-factor wellbeing model consisting of 14



questions, on a 6-item Likert scale, ranging from “never” to “every day”. Participants were asked about the frequency of experiences over a two month-period, such as: feeling interested in life, feeling that life has a sense of direction or meaning to it. Example question included: “*During the past month, how often did you feel: satisfied with life, that you had something important to contribute to society, that you had warm and trusting relationships with others*”. Past studies demonstrated high reliability of the scale (C.L.M. Keyes, 2009). The current research shows very good reliability at  $\alpha = .90$ .

### Workplace PERMA Profiler

*Workplace PERMA Profiler* (Kern, 2014), a 23-item measure, on an 11-item Likert scale, ranging between “never” to “always”, “not at all” to “completely”, or “terrible” to “excellent”. The scale assessed work-related wellbeing. The following are three examples of questions: *To what extent is your work purposeful and meaningful? To what extent do you feel excited and interested in your work? How satisfied are you with your professional relationships?* The final score comprised of the mean of five elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement, as well as a single-item question: *Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are with your work?* Past research showed high validity and reliability. The current research shows very good reliability at  $\alpha = .93$ .

## 2.1 The profile of participants

Two groups of post-primary school leaders participated in the study. At time 1, 267 school leaders completed the survey; at time 2, 251 school leaders participated in the survey. Both groups were sourced via the National Association of Principals and Deputies (NAPD). At time 1, 44% of participants were aged 40-49, 34% aged 50-59, 7% were over 60 years old, and 14% aged 30-39. At time 2, 40% of respondents were aged 40-49, 42% aged 50-59, 6% aged over 60, and the remainder were aged between 18 and 39 years old. Thus, a similar age sample was represented at both times. At time 1, 45% of participants were from Leinster, 34% from Munster, 14% from Connaught, and 6% from Ulster. At time 2, 51% of participants were located in Leinster, 30% in Munster, 12% in Connaught and 7% in Ulster, therefore, all provinces were proportionally represented. In relation to the leadership role, at time 1, the majority of participants were principals (57%), and the remainder were Deputy Principals. At time 2, the majority of participants were principals (54%), followed by deputy

principals (41%) and others, e.g., Assistant Principals (5%). Half of the participants at time 1 were in a leadership position longer than 5 years (57%) and 89% of them reported having less than 5 class contact hours a week. Similarly, half of the participants were in their role for over 5 years (55%), and 87% reported working less than 5 class contact hours.

### 3. Executive Summary

- 267 post-primary school leaders completed a wellbeing survey 1 month before the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak and 251 participants completed a survey 1 year after the pandemic began.
- 6 out of 10 participants were in a leadership position longer than 5 years.
- 9 out of 10 participants reported less than 5 class contact hours a week.

#### Leading during Covid-19

- Respondents identified that the three most significant strengths of their school community during Covid-19 were: (1) teachers adjusting quickly to remote teaching, (2) students adjusting quickly to remote learning, (3) teachers commitment to teaching and learning.
- The main actions that leaders took to maintain their wellbeing during Covid-19 were: (1) physical activity, (2) support from family and friends, (3) positive attitude, (4) reaching out to their professional network, (5) distributed leadership.
- Breaks: only 2 out of 10 leaders take their morning break regularly; only 4 out of 10 leaders take their lunch regularly; 7-8 out of 10 leaders take their time out during the weekend and school holidays.
- 8 out of 10 participants reported they did their very best during Covid-19; 8 out of 10 reported they worked very hard.
- Their main challenges were: communication from Department of Education, maintaining a work-life balance, leading teaching and learning, inadequate infrastructure and maintaining relationships.
- Stress: 7 out of 10 leaders found educating students at risk stressful; 6 out of 10 leaders found managing social distance, movement, parents' expectations and recruitment stressful; other stressors included remote leadership, sourcing staff, managing home life and school demands and the Leaving Certificate assessment.

#### Managing Leaving Certificate

- 6 out of 10 leaders found managing calculated grades stressful, and only 3 out of 10 found managing the Leaving Certificate exams stressful.
- What the respondents found particularly stressful was the lack of direction, constantly changing the nature of the situation and communication about Calculated Grades,

Leaving Cert Exams, orals, practical work, CBAs for Junior Certificate; trying to counteract misinformation and provide parents and students with accurate answers.

#### One month before and a year later: Comparison

- Stress: post-primary school leaders experienced more stress during Covid-19 than before.
- Personal wellbeing: no differences were found in leaders' wellbeing before Covid-19 and a year later.
- Work-related wellbeing: During Covid-19, leaders were more engaged at work, experienced more closeness with their colleagues, higher levels of meaning for work, and accomplishment compared to 1 month pre Covid-19.

#### Leading after Covid-19

- 5 out of 10 leaders plan to remain in the same position 5 years from now, 25% plan to retire, 10% intend to leave and 13% are uncertain as to what they will do.
- In order to make their role more attractive, they are asking for: better defined role, time to lead, middle management posts and structure, help with administration, more balanced workload and more focused professional development.
- In order to improve education post Covid-19, post-primary school leaders call for the: (1) assessment reform, (2) better communication, (3) more resourcing, (4) changes in curriculum, teaching and learning.

## 4. Recommendations

The following are recommendations following on from the research.

*Table 1. Recommendations deriving from the research results.*

<b>Level</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
<b>Supra level</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review post-Covid-19 policy changes at an international level and compare to the Irish policies</li> <li>• Identify best practice worldwide for managing remote and blended teaching and learning post-Covid-19</li> </ul>
<b>Macro level</b> <b>Government level</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and clarify leaders' role</li> <li>• Review middle management structure</li> <li>• Develop a clear communication strategy</li> <li>• Support assessment reform</li> <li>• Support the further integration of technology into education</li> <li>• Monitor leaders' wellbeing and take appropriate action to ensure it is maintained at high levels</li> </ul>
<b>Meso level</b> <b>Orgs like NAPD, INTO, PDST</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a consultation strategy</li> <li>• Explore how professional development can be enhanced for leaders</li> <li>• Define leadership roles within schools</li> <li>• List strategies and take action to reduce high levels of stress among leaders</li> <li>• Carry out further research to identify long-term effect of Covid-19 on leaders' wellbeing</li> </ul>
<b>Micro level</b> <b>Schools and staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to build on and embed the blended learning practices that have worked during the pandemic</li> <li>• Build clear communication and consultation processes into work practices</li> </ul>

<b>Micro level School leader</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore how breaks can be integrated into the working day</li><li>• Review opportunities and barriers for distributed leadership</li><li>• Build on strategies to maintain wellbeing</li></ul>
<b>Nano level Pupil</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Build on the independent learning skills developed during distance learning</li></ul>

## 5. Findings

The results of the current study are presented across three time points (Figure 1). Section 1 will delve into the realities of leading post-primary school teams during Covid-19; section 2 will review the differences in leaders' wellbeing scores one month before and a year into the Covid-19 pandemic; section 3 will offer leaders' suggestions on what can be done after the Covid-19 to help post-primary school community thrive.

Figure 1. The map of the report.



# Leading during Covid-19



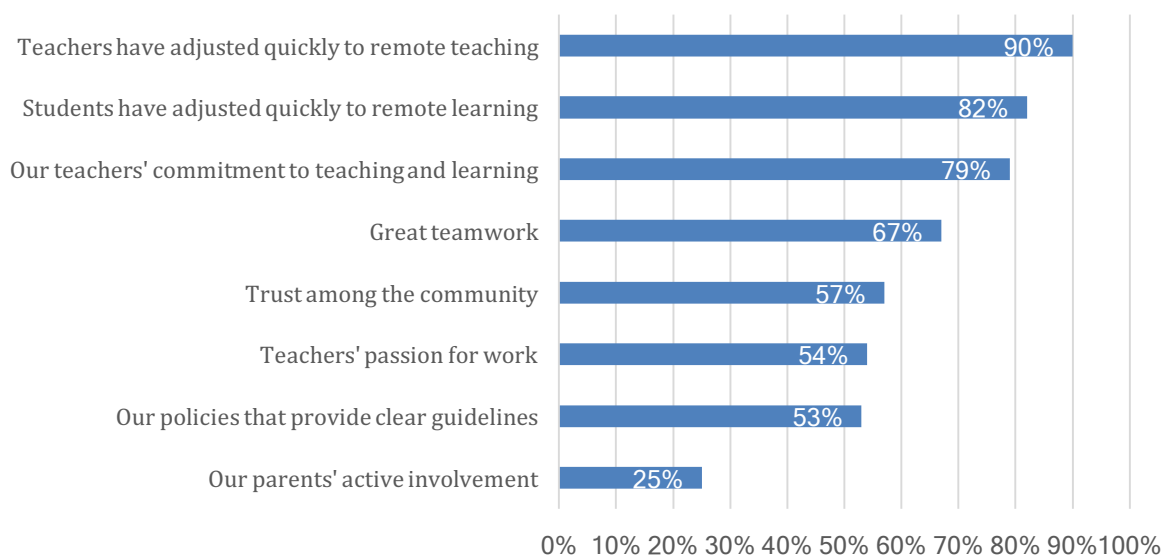


This section will start by reviewing some of the strengths of the school communities which helped them maintain quality teaching and learning throughout the pandemic. We will then review leaders' main challenges, Covid-19-related stress and other type of stressors participants coped with throughout the pandemic. We will identify the self-reported effort they put into their work during the pandemic and what actions they took to maintain their wellbeing in the face of the Covid-19 adversity. By the end of this chapter, we will have clearer picture of leaders' work-life tensions and potential solutions going forward.

### 5.1 School community strengths

We asked participants to identify the Covid-19-related school community strengths they noticed in their school, which helped them during the pandemic. For 9 out of 10 leaders, schools' main strength was teachers' ability to adjust quickly to remote learning; 8 out of 10 reported that students adjusted just as quickly. Also 8 out of 10 mentioned that their schools' strength was teachers' commitment, 7 out of 10 mentioned great teamwork and trust among the community. Whilst for half of the participants, their community's strengths were teachers' passion for work and school policies that provide clear guidance. Only a quarter of participants mentioned parents' involvement as their school community's strengths (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Prevalence of school community strengths.



It is important we consider community strengths, as one of the most effective ways to manage transformation in education is by using a strength-based approach, such as Appreciative Inquiry or School CARES models to tap into what is already working and what action can be

taken to amplify (Burke, 2021; Cooperrider, McQuaid, & Godwin, 2018). This approach provides ultimately greater dividends and often takes less time compared to a traditional, problem-focused approach, which takes up unnecessary time due to the extended dwelling on obstacles (Cameron & Lavine, 2006; Pavez, 2017).

## 5.2 Main challenges of leading through a pandemic

In this section of the research there were many long entries with one entry reaching 1080 words. This signaled two things for us, one that leaders want their voice to be heard and two that the complexity of the challenges merited many long descriptions of the role during Covid-19 pandemic.

To illustrate some excerpts are presented from the response of one participant.

*The absolute consistency of the pandemic, almost 365 days now with a relentlessness. Often as principal, school life ebbs and flows, and issues arise but nothing that is as consistent over 365 days eroding other aspects of school life as well as holiday / family time. Absolute fatigue from the unrelenting nature of it all and the impact that has on my ability to do the job to the best of my ability. Joe McHugh<sup>2</sup> announced Leaving Cert 2020 was cancelled on an Instagram session with a youth mental health group, Norma Foley<sup>3</sup> announced at 10pm on a Thursday night last October that certain hand sanitizers were not approved, necessitating my journey into school ahead of the following morning to see if the hand sanitizers we use were approved or not - ... normal lines of communication were not being used (Circulars etc.) ...impact of the pandemic has been significant on all students including on SEN students, issues around mental health has increased exponentially, it has impacted hugely on the tending to the 'normal' pre-Covid-19 life of a school. Also, the sense for students of having missed out on so many 'rites-of-passage' such as graduations, their final day walking out the school gates, missed extra-curricular activities – there is a huge sense of loss here. ... I have two primary school aged children so from March 12th to the end of June 2020 I was 50% diluted by my commitments to my children (where my wife took the other 50% as she works fulltime, also a School Principal), at a time*

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<sup>2</sup> Minister for Education in 2020 up to June 2020

<sup>3</sup> Minister for Education from June 2020 to present

*where I needed to be 100%+ available as Principal. There was a significant and importantly sustained conflict within me about this. Regrettably the demands of Principal won out time and again. ... Over the years during my time as a school principal I have been fortunate enough to be able to leave all the issues at the school gates in the evening and pick them up again the following morning. However, post March 12th, 2020, all this changed. ... Other challenges I have no doubt are already well covered by other respondents, but they would include (i) the 6pm emails from the DES, (ii) the notification to provide IT devices to students and funding for same being followed shortly thereafter with the announcement that LC2020 was cancelled, (iii) when answers are sought from officials in the DES, SEC/CGEO<sup>4</sup> they more often than did not know or it was pushed back on the school.*

When thinking about the challenges the pandemic presented there were five themes generated from the data, communication, managing work life balance, leading teaching and learning, infrastructure and relationships. These themes are alluded to by this respondent:

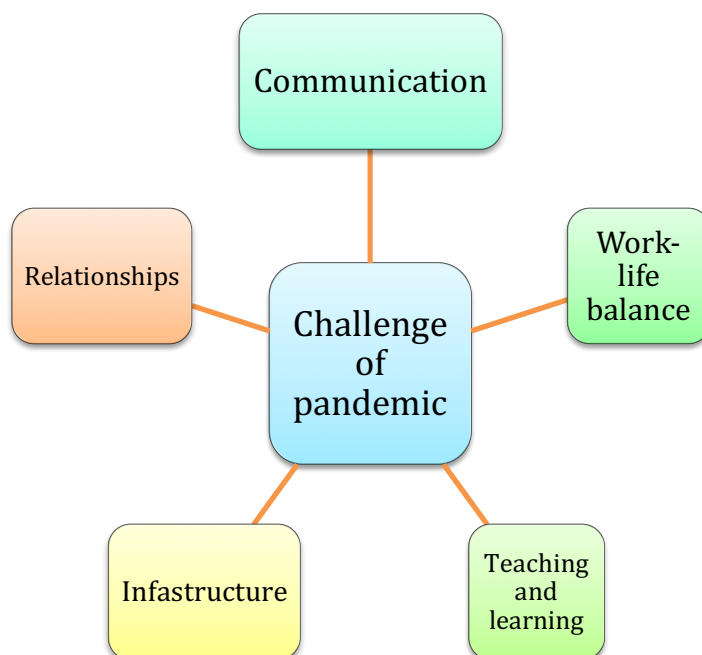
*Poor communication from the Department of Education and the 11th hour nature this communication. Lack of consultation - School leaders voice was absent from any consultation during the pandemic. The Digital Divide - bridging the gap for students and teachers who do not have the access to IT or Broadband necessary for remote teaching. Finding Substitutes during lockdown. Organising a meaningful programme for students with significant additional needs during school closure. Timetabling when we returned in September - the challenge of reducing classes from 30 to 24 and organising an equitable system for rotating students where classes needed to be reduced on a daily basis. Recruiting additional teachers in September. Planning the return to work in September - making the school safe and assuring staff that all possible measures had been put in place prior to return. Managing staff and student anxiety. Managing sick leave/Special Leave with Pay. Finding substitutes when 10% of teaching staff were on special leave with pay due to being close contacts.*

The main themes generated from data in this section are presented in Figure 3 below. Each of the themes are described using the leaders' voices in quotes.

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<sup>4</sup> CGEO Calculated Grades Executive Office

Figure 3. Challenges of leading during the pandemic - main themes



### 5.2.1 Communication

The majority of responses (over 80%) mentioned communication as a stress during the pandemic. There were different people involved in the communication challenges, however, the Department of Education (DE) was the body mentioned most frequently. The findings here echo the challenges in this area experienced by primary school principals (Burke and Dempsey, 2021).

#### *5.2.1.1 Communication with the Department of Education*

During the pandemic there was at times a breakdown in communication with media often reporting on key decision ahead of leaders getting sight of them. The move to online distance education with no notice caused major stress for school leaders, teachers, support staff and families across the education spectrum. The Department of Education (DE) provided guidance for schools in the form of statements (there were 22 between March and August, <https://www.education.ie/Covid-19>) and circulars (16 listed on the DE webpage <https://www.education.ie/Covid-19>) and some guidance documents (21 listed on the DE webpage <https://www.education.ie/Covid-1919>) including a variety of other information on supports.

*Lack of clarity from the department of education. It is very difficult to guide teachers and students with remote teaching and learning. It is difficult to answer questions concerning exams with little guidance. Depending on the media to know what to do.*

*Poor communication from the department of education. Lack of IT resources for teachers and students. Poor broadband for teachers and students. Poor planning from the department despite many of us highlighting we needed a plan in September to our inspectors when they made their curtesy call.*

The lack of clear communication has meant that many leaders feel isolated in their role.

*Isolation. Changing deadlines (Calculated Grades 2020). Lack of consultation.*

*Lack of acknowledgement of the immense additions to workload and responsibility of Principals. Lack of acknowledgement of contribution of Principals.*

This lack of clear communication led to uncertainty and additional stress for leaders.

*Decisions reported in the media with no extra information available to schools.*

*Having to make decisions while the ground is moving.*

*Poor communication from the Department means that we don't have the answers to urgent questions - makes us feel incompetent even when it's not in our power to affect the situation. Also, media reporting on schools without a clear understanding of the logistics and realities involved.*

*The ever changing context and situation. impossible to plan effectively. Always responding/reacting.*

*Lack of clear information, the constant leaking of information. The constant anxiety of knowing things can change. hard to plan.*

*Way too many circulars and directives. Constant stress. Self-doubt on all areas as constantly changing. Having to work all breaks due to either wrong sanitisers or something else.*

Making lots of decision on vague guidelines by the DES.

*Uncertainty. DES Policies and practices changing quickly with no advance warning. Holding everyone else's stresses and pressures, including the DES.*

*Unclear uncertain guidance from DES. Media creating tensions and division between parents and schools. Public perception of teaching. Isolation of school staff.*

Some leaders felt they were left out of the process and were not consulted.

*The amount of paperwork in terms of handling Covid-19 measures that inevitably is sent on Friday evenings from the DES. Lack of clarity re assessment for exam classes.*

*For me it has been a mixture of the unknown (understandable in a pandemic) coupled with the constant drip feeding by media of what will probably happen. Teachers, parents and students want answers that we don't have, they read items in the news and are frustrated that we haven't told them this information. They don't all realise we are only hearing it for the first time ourselves. The Department has been the source of many of my challenges. On the one hand each school can decide for itself (Junior Cycle 2020), on the other hand we can't (closing due to Covid-19 clusters). We also have a Deaf Facility in the school. Balancing the needs of students and staff who rely on lip reading v's compulsory wearing of masks has been a constant challenge.*

*Constant changing messages, poor communication and unclear guidance from the Department, media interest - never ending commentary, increased infection rates, constantly bombarded every time turn on phone/laptop/TV.*

*The delay in getting information out to schools from the Department of Ed. Info comes from the union quicker to the teachers. Surely Senior Management in school should get the info so they can digest and familiarise themselves with it, so they are more prepared when the general public are made aware of the guidance.*

Many respondents talk about the mis-communication around close contacts and how they felt they were placed in a position of brokering the information from policy bodies to their school community without adequate key knowledge.

*Lack of planning and foresight from DES. Information sent at the last minute on a Friday night. When we were open many people had no outlet to vent and often it was the school office who took the brunt of this as many services had stopped returning or answering the phone. Parents sending children who were waiting on tests or who were sick or who were close contacts caused alarm among the school community. The way positive cases in school were dealt with by DES and HSE felt like a cover up and many believed Principals were helping to cover up the truth. It was impossible to cover absences as it was impossible to get staff. We needed a maths teacher to cover maternity leave, we advertised twice and had no applications. Lunch breaks were of particular concern as students did not keep socially distance. Working online has increased our workload, we are always on! The dialogue and actions around state exams was very challenging. There was a significant increase in administrative work. We are burnt out.*

*Not having the information that the school community need. Leaks in the media were not at all helpful with everyone speculating and as the school leader not being able to provide clarity quickly enough.*

*Poor Communication from DES, leaks from DES. Currently relying on Emma, Carl and Katherine<sup>5</sup>.*

*Late Information from Dept and rarely as Gaeilge. We are a Gaelcholáiste. Honestly, our main challenge has been the lack of timely information and guidance from the Dept of Education. At no point have they made things easier for us, rather the opposite. Circular letters on a Friday evening, updates via the press before official word from the department, piecemeal information and information generally coming in far too late are just some of the items that cause stress to school leaders. For example, we are still waiting on the finer detail re leaving cert subjects and practical deadlines. Information is filtered out through the press- we should not find out at the same time as the nation. Surely, they can send an email to school leaders of these announcements before they go to the press. Also, they have allowed the SEC to*

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<sup>5</sup> Irish journalists

*dictate that schools,(as in school leaders) will this year organise the orals during the Easter break and at weekends, putting even further pressure on school leaders. Not following ECDC<sup>6</sup> recommendations when it comes to advice re Covid-19 in schools; the misuse of the term 'mass testing'; shoddy advice in terms of ventilation in schools (opening windows and doors and then spinning this in the media as if we have an actual ventilation system!). I could go on. In general, their treatment of school leaders has been callous and lacks professionalism.*

#### **5.2.1.2 Communication with others in the school community**

Leaders missed the face-to-face interactions and found leading from a distance was not easy for them.

*Lack of face-to-face communication. Inability to read a room or assess body language.*

*Communication with teachers as a staff and as an individual. Teacher workload. Worried over student engagement and those missing out and falling behind. The previous lack of clarity around the leaving cert. The media - so many "experts" - too many voices on what is happening today, different tomorrow. Announcements made in the media long before there is any information for schools.*

*Communication. Email is a great tool, but it is being overused now. My inbox is constantly full and with so many emails to deal with every day from parents, staff and students, it can be hard to actually find the time to pick up the phone and make phone calls which would help and support all members of the school community in a more personal way.*

*We did not have enough support or communication from outside agencies such as CAMHS to help us deal with issues for our students.*

Communicating with parents also presented additional challenges.

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<sup>6</sup> European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control



*Dealing with the very small number of difficult and challenging parents who do not show understanding of how challenging this situation is for everyone - teachers, students and parents.*

*Lots of issues relating to Covid-19, including one parent bringing complaints to the BOM and taking an Equal Status Act complaint. Impossible to keep everyone happy - teachers, parents. Trying to keep everyone motivated and staying positive for everyone else.*

*Parents who believe they can do my job.*

*Technical issues and unrealistic expectations of some parents.*

*Increasingly unrealistic expectations from parents.*

In conclusion, communication is one area that will need a lot of focus as we move into the post-Covid-19 space in education. The institutional memory of miscommunication needs to be addressed by putting in place a strategy for communicating with leaders who at the forefront of brokering communications from the policy bodies for their communities.

### 5.2.2 Challenge of having a work-life balance

For many leaders working from home and implementing Covid-19 regulations has impacted on their work-life balance during the pandemic (Putri and Amran, 2021). The respondents to this survey are reporting that their workload has increased and that this is impacting on their lives.

*Workload has increased dramatically - little guidance or last minute guidance, keeping positive, motivating people, juggling life with home - being a school leader with two small kids at home. Guilt.*

*Stress and workload. It was unstainable even before this, all school should have a second Deputy Principal.*

*Extra supervision, our school does not qualify for Enhanced supervision, all of this is falling on the shoulders of both myself and the Deputy Principal.*

*It is very difficult to strategise and plan. There is no autopilot mode, everything needs to be overseen and micromanaged to ensure compliance.*

*Balancing home-schooling with my own work with no support. Felt very alone; worked from 5am until midnight every weekday and Sunday.*

The pandemic and work have impacted on family life.

*The toughest day for me was the day schools broke for the Christmas holidays on Tuesday December 22nd. Like many other Principals, Deputy Principals this was a date in my mind where I was saying if I can just get to the Christmas holidays (it was another marker point in the journey since March 12th). The day arrived and I was delighted to get to that point and some respite from the unrelenting and all-pervasive nature on my work, all staff and students had left that afternoon. About 3.45pm I got a call from the HSE to my mobile as per the request to all principals from the HSE. There was a case of Covid-19 and could I assist with the contact tracing. I left school that night at 8.00pm as a consequence, arriving home to my children on this day that I said I would have more time for them, yet arriving home 4 hours or so later than I had planned. It was, to use a boxing metaphor, like having been on the ropes and awaiting the bell for the end of the round and then this blow comes in. It was almost a knockout blow, a sense of how much more can I take.*

*Continuity and perseverance. People are very tired. No regard for the personal life of school management from the Dept.*

To put the challenge of balancing work and life in perspective , the following response is worth considering. Here we can see the multiple roles leaders have and how they need to *decode* communication. The concern for students is also emphasised here as is the feeling of isolation mentioned by many respondents.

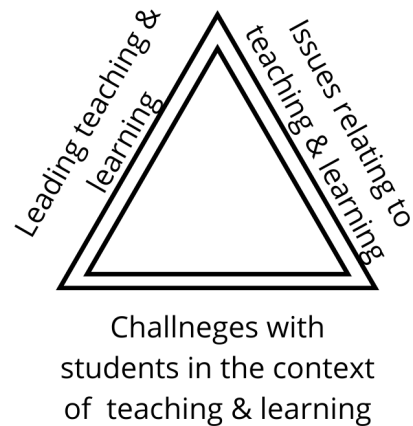
*Lack of clear guidelines on time and with additional personnel support. Lack of appreciation for weekends, time off, contacting us with plans at all times, usually outside of work. Complete disregard for people in management having a family, dependents, sick relatives and getting sick ourselves. Lack of DES support, continuation of initiatives from people working from home looking for deadlines and work from school management. Only having an allocation of 5 of a Deputy. Working in substandard buildings and trying to facilitate Covid-19 requirements. The fact that the heightened crisis mode has not eased and the requirements for many BOM to ratify plans, responses. Writing out to parents weekly to clarify, explain and decode DES communication. Managing leave for staff with no substitutes available. Dealing with parental fear, expectations and disregard for Covid-19 protocols. Handing out equipment, resources and being available when all DES departments are working from home. NEPS cannot come into the building, yet the students' needs don't end. Not having enough counselling supports, mental health supports and EWO has phoned once in August and once on the first day of Mid-Term. Complete disrespect, disregard and consideration of Principals opinion and in the ground experience. Where was the DES critical incident management plan? Leaving principals isolated and dealing with HR, IR, Building, Planning, etc. Having Inspectorate with no management experience giving advice and guidance. That when the pandemic is over as a principal I will be burned out.*

In conclusion, the lack of real work-life balance is leading to increased stress and a feeling of being *burned out* by some respondents.

### 5.2.3 Leading teaching and learning

One of the core aspects of leaders' work is teaching and learning in their schools and how this is coordinated by senior management. This was a challenge for some during the pandemic.

Figure 4. Leading teaching and learning



#### 5.2.3.1 Leading teaching and learning at school level

There were many tasks competing for leaders time, including following health guidelines while trying to creatively lead teaching and learning for the school community.

*Keeping everyone safe while trying to ensure teaching and learning continue to the highest levels. To ensure students with particular needs are helped to the best of our ability. Ensuring the continuation of pastoral support at a distance and essentially keeping the show on the road.*

*Trying to ensure that all members of the school community adhere strictly to the guidelines and then dealing with those who are tempted to bend the guidelines. Trying to teach and be an effective deputy Principal.*

*Keeping everybody happy - teachers, parents and teachers tiny minority of very difficult and demanding staff.*

*Supporting the wellbeing of our staff and students during these very difficult times. Attempting to keep a focus on teaching and learning when pandemic issues take precedence.*

Some decisions on what classes to bring back after the January closures were seen as political and to put an over emphasis on the Leaving Certificate over the other more social and emotional needs of younger students.

*Lack of clarity and effective communication from the DES and most especially the politicisation of education. The insistence on protecting the Leaving Certificate at all costs is having and will continue to have a detrimental effect on education especially on the 1st and 2nd years. The proposal to bring 5th years back to school before 1st and 2nd years is absolutely political and not educationally sound. 5th years are independent learners, so they are coping better with online learning than the younger years.*

The change to pedagogical practices due to mask wearing and social distancing was highlighted in an earlier report by Dempsey and Burke (2021), this is also mentioned by respondents to this survey. In addition, it is highlighted the many different individual impacts the pandemic is having on students.

*Teaching and learning methodologies have been challenged. Masks in classrooms while teaching brings its own disadvantages. The fear of the unknown, vulnerable people in families, disruption to the school routine, classrooms, timetable. Students who have not coped with the first lockdown, the effects are now becoming obvious.*

#### *5.2.3.2 Issues relating to leading staff and teaching and learning*

There was added stress in trying to manage all the Covid-19 protocols. In normal circumstances the leader would rarely intervene on how a teacher organises their classroom but during the pandemic this was an added role for leaders. They had to ensure all classrooms were Covid-19 compliant. Also, they encountered challenges in replacing staff who were out sick due to availability of substitute teachers in some subject areas.

*Teachers - difficulty in gaining consensus on implementing Covid-19 protocols.*

*Staffing, dealing with stressed staff.*

*Managing teacher stress and student and parent anxiety.*

*Staff wellbeing- torn between the commitments of the workplace and home.*

*Teachers and students have adjusted to remote learning over the last year and it is working well now. However, in March 2020 it was very challenging. Another challenge is communicating with staff. What are quick informal communications in school end up being online meetings or phone calls that take up time.*

*Significant stress exhibited by some staff members leading to irrational and confrontational behaviour, this was particularly evident as school returned in August.*

*- Initial issues in supporting students in their online learning and engagement and raising awareness with their parents/guardians - Dealing with some difficult members of staff - Trying to ensure that staff communicate the correct SEC related information to their students and not to revert back to old/misleading phrases e.g., Calculated Grades v's Accredited Grades - Supporting staff in managing their stress, their IT resources and their concerns for their students.*

*Trying to ensure that staff go online for live classes/learning and also for students to do the same. There were too many variables involved so hard to have a consistent approach.*

*To maintain a sustainable workload for teachers. They are working extremely hard under challenging conditions. The pressure placed on teachers by some parents is very damaging.*

*Fear! Teachers who are fearful of trying new things and who haven't seen technology as part of teaching. They've fallen so far behind that the gap seemed too wide and daunting to even attempt to bridge. We got there but for a small few it was extremely challenging. Some expressed their fears by reaching out and asking for help while others, unfortunately, expressed their feelings by being very uncooperative.*

*Keeping students motivated, the extra work that teachers have to put in to prepare for online classes-causing some stress.*

There were many challenges for leaders working with teachers during the lock-down but in the main these seem to have been overcome according to the data in this survey with many praising the work of their staff and expressing worry that they were able to maintain a work-life balance through it all.

### 5.2.3.3 Challenges with students in the context of teaching and learning

Leaders expressed many concerns for students' learning and wellbeing during the pandemic.

*Student mental health issues, working on engaging some students, serious lack of outside supports for students and counselling hours in schools not sufficient, hard to get simple things done remotely, personal emotional drain as I try to support all.*

*Few but getting some students and parents to work or encourage their student to work has been frustrating.*

*Connecting with students and staff to see how people are coping.*

*Student and staff wellbeing. Variation in support in homes.*

*Wellbeing of students and staff during these very challenging times. Ensuring full adherence to all COVID-19 regulations by all of the school community.*

*Mental Health difficulties mainly amongst students. Trying to strike right balance between work and leisure for both staff and students. Work overload a problem for both. Lack of ICT equipment for some students. Continuous loading of work and extra responsibilities on Principals and Deputies while giving little or no support. Dept not answering phones.*

*Lack of engagement from some. Unable to see people to adequately provide support. Carrying the worries of the school with no-one to share these with as teachers are busy with their online classes.*

*Student attendance is a real challenge.*

The concern for student welfare was a heavy burden that leaders had to carry during this time.

*DEIS Band 1 school, inequity in relation to student engagement, issues with devices, WI-FI, lack of parental involvement, concerns about students in the home.*

*Pastoral care for students when they are not in school.*

*Encouraging students to stay engaged Keeping on top of everything the unknown and uncertainty as to what is happening especially the lack of clear guidance from the DES.*

*Finding the time to teach, support colleagues and continue with all the usual tasks such as timetable planning, next year's school admissions and most importantly supporting students with SEN and identifying and supporting students who are struggling at this time.*

*Trying to keep on top of the students engagement when we rely so heavily on parents to report problems. We are the ones that really discover the issues.*

*Staff anxiety. Student anxiety. Keeping up momentum. Staying positive. Uncertainty especially around exams.*

*The longer it goes on we have noticed engagement from students is becoming more laboured. My time taken up each day, contacting parents about one or two students that find the online very challenging. SEN Children that also have issues online.*

Some of the issues with students is to do with technology and physical structures.

#### **5.2.4 Infrastructure**

Some respondents cited issues with technology and infrastructure as a challenge to them leading during the pandemic.

*IT issues for students. Lack of devices for students. Trying to ensure the wellbeing of staff. Parents stress and the knock on effect with students.*

*Satellite classes as we only have small sized rooms so only 22 per class rather than 30. Very problematic. The constantly changing landscape and regulations. No clear direction regarding State Examinations still.*

*Technological challenges every day!*



*-Unequal access to devices amongst our student cohort -Students in some areas, particularly rural areas, lose out due to a Wi-Fi deficit - Poor communication and leaks from the DES, which causes anxiety and misunderstanding amongst students and parents/guardians in particular.*

*IT, keeping students motivated.*

The need for social distancing has highlighted the shortcomings of many school buildings. In this response the leader talks about their “horrific conditions”.

*Maintaining the safety of the building. Maintaining ICT infrastructure.*

*Our school building... freezing cold, poor facilities, water leaking through our gym roof.... single glaze windows. We work in horrific conditions. No room to meet parents/only one office for all our year heads, small canteen not suitable for all students so nowhere for students to go at lunchtime, lockers outside. Children having to wear extra layers and coats even prior to no having to have windows and doors open...*

*The building - need for constant repair and upgrade - looking for extension - time delay in getting anywhere! Lack of time to work on leading teaching and learning - no time this year! The thoughts of having Covid-19 related testing introduced to schools - who will manage this? And of course, the timely circulars issued by DES/SEC - 11 am on Saturday mornings, 6.30pm in the evening, 5.30pm on Friday! Can the relevant departments set more appropriate times for these emails to issue please?*

*Time, unreasonable expectations, negativity in media aimed at the teaching profession. Old dysfunctional school building with small classrooms, I have mentioned social distancing in school because the building and rooms are just not big enough.*

*Broadband issues. Online fatigue. Uncertainty about when it finishes.*

*Broadband and lack of it and devices for students. We are a DEIS school, and our families are very disadvantaged. Many of our parents cannot use devices themselves*

*and cannot help their children. Broadband is very poor in the area and many of our parents cannot afford it.*

The digital divide is well documented (Mohan et al., 2020) and needs to be addressed as the pandemic highlighted the way it reinforces inequalities in our education system. In addition, the lack of or inadequate physical spaces in some older buildings for teaching and learning has been evident in recent years.

### **5.2.5 Relationships**

For some maintaining relationships during this time has been a challenge. They miss the face-to-face interactions. The work of schools is very relational, and this is difficult when working from a distance and maintaining social distancing while in the building.

*Lack of nuanced face to face meetings/ lack of those countless bread and butter transactions which are the lifeblood of what we do as leaders.*

*Maintaining relationships and keeping connected. Feel shut out as all online so need to work harder to check in with people. Challenging not having answers to questions and receiving guidelines at short notice. Challenging trying to keep everyone healthy and safe.*

*Keeping everyone's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing safe while in the school building and also while not. The Dept of Education, poor communication, late notification, high expectations, mixed messages. Staff and students fears of their own health and home circumstances. The attritional nature of managing all of above without the enjoyable hidden curriculum that keeps schools fun and active. It has been like managing a critical incident for a year, you are on a constant state of high alert.*

*Keeping the morale going for both staff and students. Keeping a balance between academic and wellbeing online. Juggling issues regarding temporary accommodation and numbers capping. Juggling building works, issues with power and water supply, Wi-Fi, etc.*

*Emotional needs of staff, parents and students. Constant documentation and changes from DES and government all of which we are expected to be expert on the moment they arrive.*

*Responsibility and duty of care, and associated costs in terms of workload and wellbeing. The inability to meet in person in big groups - really missing the connectivity and sense of community.*

*Providing access to quality T and L for all students. Same level of 1to1 small group work and team teaching not possible. Just meeting people face to face. All of these interactions provide much needed information that can be used to inform so much of what happens in the running of a school. NOT being physically present is for me the main challenge.*

*Communication that is not face to face can often be misinterpreted.*

*Meeting staff, time to contact all staff. Communicating with staff within school hours. (No lunchbreaks or small breaks for conversations on yard or in staff room)*

In conclusion, the thematic analysis of this section of data on the challenges of leading during the pandemic highlighted the on-going issues with communication from policy bodies such as the Department of Education. It showed that leaders are challenged to achieve work life balance with so many tasks to be completed. The centrality of teaching and learning is emphasised and the need for good infrastructure to support both in-school and online learning. Finally, the pandemic has impacted on relationships and has shown the importance of the school as a community where relationships are nurtured through day-to-day interactions. These are not as easy to nurture from a distance.

### 5.3 Stress-inducing Covid-19-related activities

Stress is an inevitable part of life and at moderate levels it is associated with improved concentration, enhanced performance, and higher levels of wellbeing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Lyubomirsky, 2013; McGonigal, 2016). However, relentless stress is responsible for a decline in wellbeing and may lead to burnout (DeMatthews, Carrola, Reyes, & Knight, 2021; O'Neill, 2020; Reynolds, Bruno, Ross, Hall, & Reynolds, 2020). Therefore, care needs to be

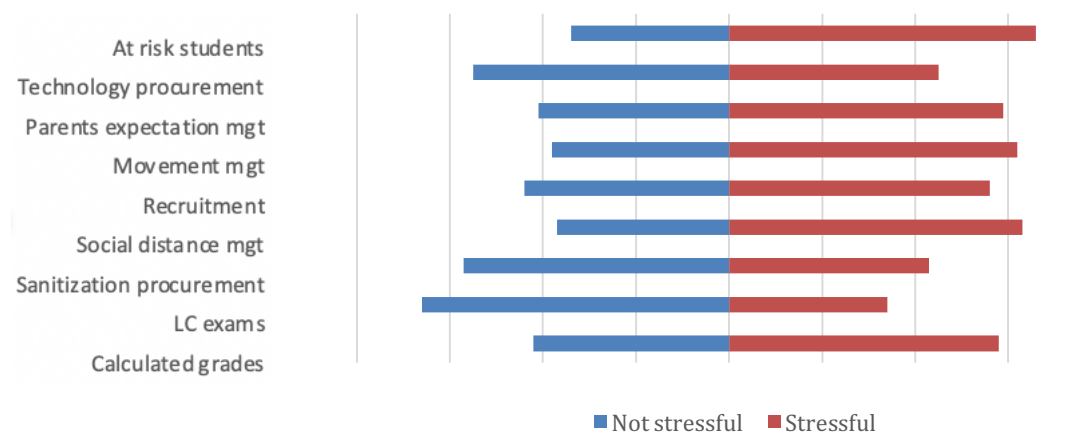
taken not to overburden leaders with stress and ensure that adequate supports and respite from duties are offered to them.

We provided leaders with a list of activities they engaged in during Covid-19 and asked them to assess how stressful they were for them. The most stressful Covid-19-related activities included helping students at risk, managing social distance, movement, recruitment, calculated grades and parents' expectations during the crisis.

*Table 2. Stress-inducing Covid-19-related activities.*

Activities	Not stressful	Stressful
Calculated grades	42%	58%
LC exams	66%	34%
Sanitization procurement	57%	43%
Social distance management	37%	63%
Recruitment	44%	56%
Movement management	38%	62%
Parents expectation management	41%	59%
Technology procurement	55%	45%
At risk students	34%	66%

Figure 5. Stress-inducing Covid-19-related activities.



Whilst it is impossible and unhelpful to remove stress, care needs to be taken to support leaders so that no additional stressors are introduced, which further exacerbate their stress.

Therefore, in the next section, we will review some of the additional causes of stress that participants of the current study mentioned.

### 5.3.1 Additional causes of stress

In this section some of the themes overlap with the previous section on the challenges to leading a school during the pandemic. For a small minority they reported that they did not have any additional stress as exemplified by the following two quotes:

*I don't really have any. The Principal and our second deputy have worked really well as a Team. In closure one or two of us were available each day and we worked from home on other days. This was easier than having like last march no one in the school. Meetings virtually were good and the process this lockdown went really smoothly. We are very lucky to have wonderful staff and we used time wisely before Christmas to upskill staff and ensured that all Students had access to devices and their office 365 accounts, this helped minimise stress.*

*To be fair, I don't have any. Life is too short to get caught up worrying about what every stakeholder things. All I can do is do my best for our school. However, my family are my main priority. The job is just a job. It has taken me 4 years to realize this.*

The main themes emerging are presented below with supporting quotes from respondents.

#### 5.3.1.1 Communication

The many stresses here are similar to the challenges mentioned earlier in section 5.2

*This entire year all communication from the department has been through the news channels. No meeting has ever been organised with Principals and even the unions are now deciding that we can work during the holidays again without our consultation. I did not even get one day off last summer because of the amount of work that needed to be done in advance of opening. I am exhausted and tired of it. The Principals worked through calculated grades and everything else with no time off, no remuneration and no thanks. The job has morphed from a huge stressful job to an impossible one with no supports in place. The announcement of an extra deputy*

*for schools over 600 is no good to DEIS schools who need an extra deputy all of the time even before Covid-19. Covid-19 requires a person on its own to deal with everything. Office facilities provided to Principals at home. we have been working from home for almost a year with no landline, no printers, scanners, franking machines, office chairs or desks.*

*Not being able to answer legitimate questions of staff, students and parents as we do not have the information. Finding out information on Twitter JCT sending emails about cluster day on Monday 1st the first day back!!*

*Ensuring that we fully deliver for our students while juggling directives from the department. Drip feeding of information and allowing for the growth of hearsay and gossip is unwelcome and unhelpful.*

*Endless documentation to be carefully studied, mostly turning up on a Friday or during so called holidays, meaning the weekend is now all work. Vastly increased administrative work coordinating Additional Supervision and the associated payroll. The outdated infatuation with teacher and school accountability in multiple ways. The issuing of Dept circulars on a Friday evening. The dictation from the Dept and total absence of any type of trust in the professionalism of principals to do their job. The lack of a plan from DES. The DES sending emails at 500 on a Friday is downright insulting. I would not communicate with my staff on a Friday giving them a task to be done. Staff students very anxious regarding new strain, need quick testing and proper contact tracing.*

*Huge increase in communication needed - MS Teams, video calls, assemblies, email, phone, texts. Changing information - media, union, DES, SEC. Short timeframe between accurate information published and when it needs to be disseminated.*

*Balancing family and work commitments, supporting staff members with bereavements/illness/anxiety.*

*The volume of documentation that is coming from Dept but also other organisations. Needs to be a summary of docs in one place.*

*Poor communication and lack of direction from the DES/government. Managing very confined space in the school (with less rooms, waiting for extension project to complete). Time taken to engage with people (through telecommunication or email, etc. as opposed to face to face.*

There is added stress trying to deal with students and parents.

*Unreasonable expectations on the part of students and parents regarding operational matters and an attempt to unduly influence outcomes by citing how stressed students are.*

*Dealing with the fallout from media speculation on students, staff and parents. getting information at awful times. Often Friday night - last week update on LCVP arrived at Saturday lunchtime - all while DES talks about the importance of wellbeing. No understanding of what that means.*

*Unrealistic expectations! The DE seem to think that senior management can resolve all issues. Bland and unspecific guidelines issued at 6.30pm on a Friday. Schools have had to have a Plan B from September and the inspectors were looking for it. Where was the DE Plan B?*

The NAPD is a very important support for leaders in dealing with a myriad of communication.

*The overwhelming amount of material that comes at schools from the Department, JCT, PDST, NCSE, TESS etc. Management are expected to read and disseminate this accurately to staff. Thank god for our management body who do a great job in briefing us. Finding that information again when you need to put your hand to it - impossible! Friday emails from the Department... unacceptable in this day and age. I wonder how the pandemic would have played out for schools in the 1980's when schools would need to wait for info to arrive by post!*

### 5.3.1.2 Leaving Certificate and Assessment

The topic of the Leaving Certificate is discussed in more length in section 7; however, leaders indicate it as a source of additional stress.

*Lack of direction about Calculated Grades, Leaving Cert Exams, Orals, practicals, CBAs for JC.*

*There is no substitution for sick Principals. Calculated grades emails at 10pm, 7am Saturday mornings, during holidays no boundaries, excessive expectations and no resources to deliver.*

*Consistently trying to counteract misinformation and inaccurate information with that which is correct as naturally Parents and students alike expect school leaders to have more answers. This has not been the case for the last year. (e.g., March 12<sup>th</sup> last year, Calculated Grades 2020, School reopening in August, School Closures from Christmas onwards, The LC debacle)*

*Obviously... The extremely poor communication from the department. From March 2020, it has been appalling. If we treated our staff with similar disrespect, we would be facing a coup! Thankfully, in the past 2 weeks, there has been a noticeable improvement in details around LC and JC. Poor effort and communication on LCA is noted.*

*Constant changing nature of the situation, real lack of understanding of what it's like to be in management - on the one hand we are told to mind ourselves then we are told to run orals and facilitate LCA Tasks at Easter. When are we to get any time out?*

### 5.3.1.3 Sourcing staff and meeting students' needs is a source of stress

Sourcing staff is linked to meeting the needs of students. There were more teaching days to be covered due to illness and staff isolating.

*Recruiting substitution staff for absent staff.*

*The worries shared by staff and students Re Covid-19 fears. The sense of heavy responsibility guiding the school's response to the pandemic.*



*Finding SNA and teacher subs, S and S scheme a nightmare.*

*Managing those who did not believe in visors/ masks and the impact that this had on teachers having these students in their class.*

*Keeping the students apart when they return to school especially at break times.*

*Preparing properly for our incoming first years when we have had no contact with them. Concerned about the mental health of our pupils and how we will support them on their return.*

*The constant bombardment of emails from students, parents who are constantly worried about on-line T and L and problems that arise.*

*You can't get any procuring technology: if you don't have the financial resources, you just can't be meeting the needs of at risk students: where you can't interact face to face it is almost impossible to really meet their needs. Schools should have remained open for at risk students and those that had no internet access. They could have been supervised in the school building which could have allowed them to access the online teaching even with the teachers being off-site. This would only have been for a small number of kids.*

#### 5.3.1.4 The stress of remote leadership

Trying to lead from afar was a source of additional stress. This coupled with additional administrative lead associated with the pandemic has meant that leaders are feeling on call since March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

*Remote management of the school. Organisation of effective remote meetings etc. in a DEIS school setting. The Admissions process for the 2021-2022 intake.*

*Supervision of staff working from home. Lack of clarity around the school's expectations of non-teaching staff. Lack of real support from many external agencies - all very good at listing all of the reasons why they can't support schools. I'm not sure what exactly many of them have been doing over the past year. Difficulties in accessing the advice/help/support of various sections of the DES - phone calls not returned etc. ...*

*Managing social distancing at break times - impossible Thinking 'outside the box' for almost everything – PT Meetings, Fulfilling Croke Park hours, etc. Managing expectations of parents/students around the provision of extra-curricular activities. Continuing to do all of the 'normal' school management remotely - interviews, subject options, graduation, etc. Managing without admin staff who were working remotely. Mental health and wellbeing of students and staff. New Admission Policy, review of new policy.*

*Last 3 years has seen an exceptional increase in the workload of school leaders. Stress factors in our voluntary secondary school - Budgeting Dept of Education pushing huge workload on schools while not cognisant of the everyday experience of a school leader. Stress is constant in the day to day firefighting. Covid-19 has added another layer of stress.*

*Staff anxiety around Covid-19. Massive administrative workload - not everything can be delegated. Small team - every DEIS school should have a second DP. I'm still relatively new to the job and trying to establish systems in a school where there were very few. The load on my only secretary.*

*Managing the digital divide in a DEIS school.*

*The job is very stressful anyway. So Covid-19 was a stressful job put on top of a stressful job.*

#### 5.3.1.5 Managing home life and school demands.

Working from home during the pandemic meant that leaders were juggling multiple roles and duties.

*Double jobbing as a school leader and a parent managing remote learning of my children. Elderly parent also.*

*The complete lack of a break. Big announcements during holidays, no break during summer getting ready. Easter now taken up with exams. All understandable but DES*

*announcement Good Friday and during mid-term almost felt like it was put there to interrupt any break there might be. Managing people who are very worried.*

*Workload of leading a school while trying to home school my own children. Teacher shortages, lack of training around ASD classes. DP is stepping now next year due to workload not sustainable with young family. Worried about my health and my own family.*

*Managing family life - married to a frontline worker and with 3 small children.*

*Redeployment being announced the week before we were supposed to be getting mid-term break. Having had my summer holidays cut short as there was so much work to be done to get the school ready to reopen in September. Having had to work through all of the 'holidays' this year just to try to get on top of the basics. I am still totally behind in many aspects of the running of the school and there just aren't enough hours in the day to get it all done.*

*ETB Schools cannot purchase anything until Circulars arrive - V Sec Schools get more time to get organised. No staff available, no laptops from procured suppliers, couldn't appoint reopening aides until circular letter arrived and then had to go through process which meant the management team had done most of the preparatory work before the reopening team were ready on site, each parent has a different expectation and requirement - impossible to meet all expectations.*

In conclusion, the additional stresses leaders reported were around communication, the Leaving Certificate, sourcing staff, meeting students' needs and workload.

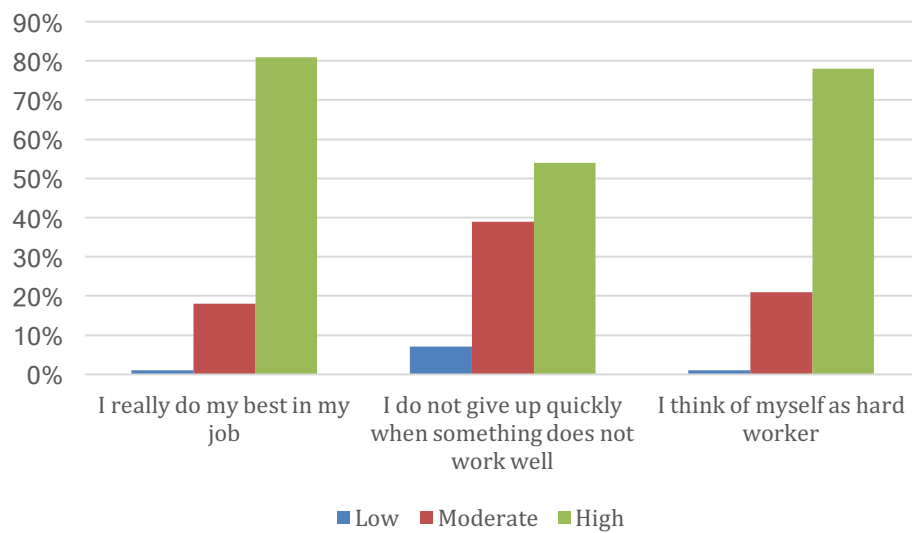
#### 5.4 Putting effort

We asked leaders questions about how much effort they put into their work during Covid-19. A total of 8 out of 10 participants reported they did their very best; 5 out of 10 said they kept persisting through difficulties and 8 out of 10 reported that they worked very hard. The detail of their responses is in Table 3 and Figure 6.

*Table 3. Leaders putting effort.*

Effort-related statements	Low	Moderate	High
I really do my best in my job	1%	18%	81%
I do not give up quickly when something does not work well	7%	39%	54%
I think of myself as hard worker	1%	21%	78%

Figure 6. Leaders putting effort.

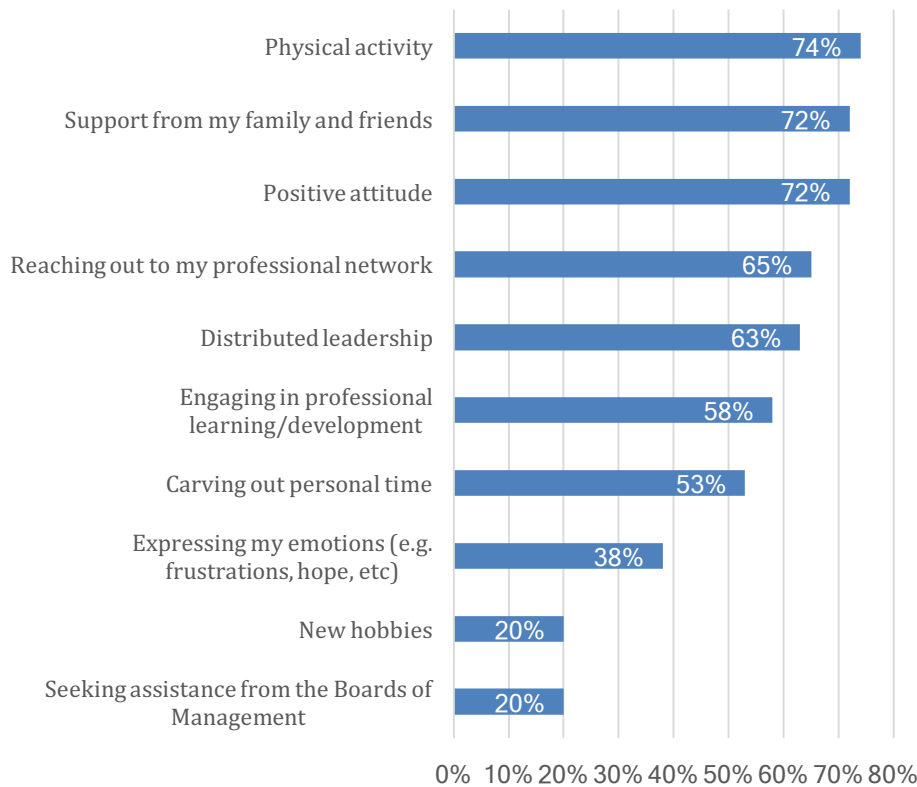


Work effort is associated with higher levels of motivation and autonomy (De Cooman, Stynen, Van den Broeck, Sels, & De Witte, 2013). It is therefore not surprising that such as high number of leaders in the current study demonstrated hard work and tried to do their best during the pandemic. It is, however, striking that only half of the leaders scored highly in relation to not giving up quickly. That ability to persist is associated

### 5.5 Actions to maintain wellbeing

We asked leaders to identify the actions they took to maintain their wellbeing during Covid-19. The most popular actions for 7 out of 10 participants were physical activity, support from family and friends, keeping positive attitude and reaching out to their professional network. The least popular activity related to taking up new hobbies and seeking assistance from the Boards of Directors (Figure 7).

Figure 7. The prevalence of actions leaders took during the pandemic to support their wellbeing.



### 5.5.1 Other actions

One respondent said “I am not sure that I have maintained wellbeing” another reported that they “Have worked much harder since the pandemic”. The other actions mentioned were:

*Contacted the EAS and got 6 sessions of counselling*

*Meditation, walking*

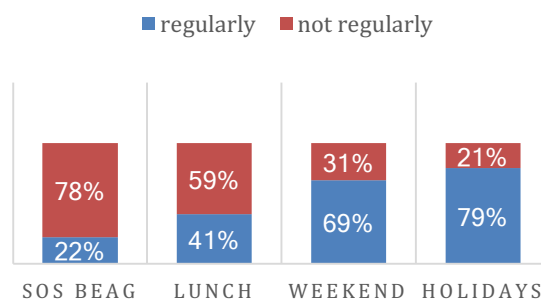
*Coaching*

### 5.6 Breaks

On-the-job breaks, such as lunch and morning break, as well as off-the-job breaks, such as taking a weekend off or time out during school holidays are important strategies for leaders to maintain their wellbeing (Gu, Wang, & You, 2020; S. Kim, Park, & Niu, 2017). Taking time out during the day prevents physical, cognitive and emotional depletion in the afternoon, as well as prevents burnout the following week (Bosch, Sonnentag, & Pinck, 2018; Ragsdale & Beehr, 2016). Therefore, taking the time out is a crucial routine for leaders who wish to maintain their wellbeing.

In the current research, 8 out of 10 participants do not take their morning break and 6 out of 10 do not take their lunch break regularly. However, in relation to the off-the job breaks, 7 out of 10 participants regularly take their weekend off and 8 out of 10 take time out during school closure, see Figure 8. Further research needs to establish the reason as to why some leaders are more likely to take breaks. Also, obstacles for taking time out need to be discussed with leaders and a new healthier routine needs to be introduced.

Figure 8. The prevalence of leaders regularly taking their breaks.



## 5.7 Conclusion

Leadership during the pandemic was challenging for the post-primary school leaders. Their main challenges were associated with communication with DES and the school community, managing teaching and learning amid the pandemic, as well as ensuring their work-life balance, given all the additional duties they were tasked with. In addition to this, what caused them most stress was dealing with some of the Covid-related tasks, teacher substitution recruitment, Leaving Certificate calculated grades and keeping parents' expectations at bay. At the same time, leaders have acknowledged that the greatest strengths of their school community were teachers and students who have swiftly adjusted to changed circumstances.

One month before and one year  
later

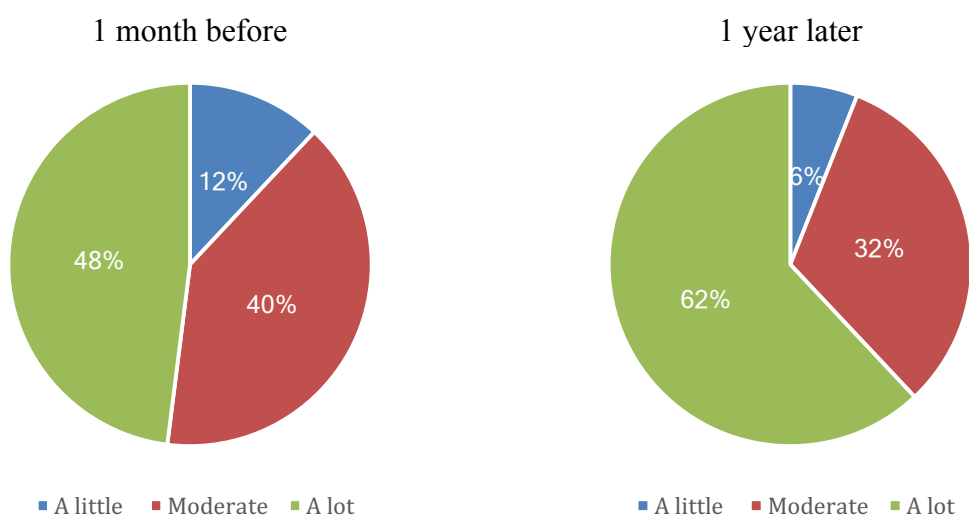


In this section, we will compare post-primary school leaders' wellbeing one month before the Covid-19 outbreak (January-February 2020) and one year later (Feb-Mar 2021). Specifically, we will identify differences in leaders' perceived stress, personal wellbeing, work-related wellbeing.

### 6. 1 Perceived Stress

Perceived stress relates to the self-reported measure of how much stress individuals experienced over a period of time. Pre-pandemic, 48% of leaders experienced a lot of stress whereas during the pandemic 62% reported experiencing stress. Pre-pandemic research in other sectors (including state agencies) indicated 7-30% of employees experiencing “a lot” of stress and the vast majority reporting “moderate” stress (Dempsey & Burke, 2021c). At the same time, research with primary school leaders in Ireland during the pandemic demonstrated they had a higher level of perceived stress compared with their post-primary counterparts, which may be due to the infrastructure differences between level one and two sectors (Burke & Dempsey, 2021b). Nonetheless, 60% of leaders experiencing “a lot” of stress is considerably too high to maintain long-term without experiencing health problems, therefore action needs to be taken to offer leaders additional supports that allows them to stay at “moderate” levels of stress in the future.

Figure 9. Leaders' stress levels pre and post Covid-19.



We also compared leaders' perceived experiences of stress during the school year a month before Covid-19 and a year later. Statistically significant difference was found between



leaders' stress, in that they experience more stress during Covid-19 (M=2.56, SD=.61) than before Covid-19 (M=2.36, SD=.69).

This finding is not surprising given the additional stressors leaders experienced at work during Covid-19, as indicated in section 5.3. of this report. However, considering that their stress was already at a higher-level pre-pandemic, action needs to be taken promptly to reduce leaders' stress so that it does not lead to negative long-term consequences.

## 6.2 Personal Wellbeing

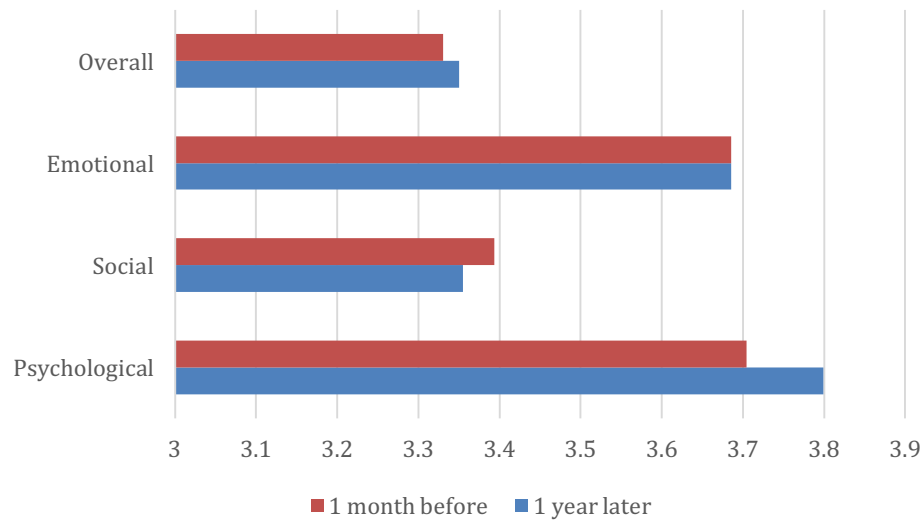
Personal wellbeing relates to an amalgamation of three main perspectives of wellbeing (psychological, emotional and social) which protect leaders against mental health issues and help them become more resilient in the face of adversity (Burke, 2021; Corey L. M. Keyes, 2002). Emotional wellbeing relates to their daily experiences of positive and negative emotions, as well as their overall life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). This type of wellbeing is often referred to and measured by large-scale studies as happiness. The psychological wellbeing relates to deeper-level wellbeing that incorporates self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth and autonomy (Ryff, 2014). Finally, the social wellbeing relates to social integration, social contribution, social acceptance, social coherence and social actualization, e.g. social growth (Corey Lee M. Keyes, 1998). All these three elements provide a construct that describes leaders' personal wellbeing.

Differences in personal wellbeing related to emotional wellbeing, social wellbeing, psychological wellbeing and overall wellbeing. No statistically significant differences were found in personal wellbeing a month before Covid-19 and a year later (Table 4, Figure 9).

*Table 4. Mean and standard deviation results for personal wellbeing a month before Covid-19 and a year later.*

	1 month before		1 year later	
	M	SD	M	SD
Psychological	3.7	0.71	3.8	0.75
Social	3.39	0.93	3.35	0.88
Emotional	3.69	0.92	3.69	0.91
Overall	3.33	0.67	3.35	0.67

Figure 10. Differences in personal wellbeing a month before Covid-19 and a year later.



While there are no other studies assessing wellbeing before and during Covid-19 using the mental health continuum model of assessment, research carried out across 78 countries during Covid-19-related lockdown showed that the personal wellbeing levels remain similar to the average pre-Covid-19 levels (Gloster et al., 2020; Corey L. M. Keyes, 2002; Corey L. M. Keyes, Yao, Hybels, Milstein, & Proeschold-Bell, 2020). Therefore, the results are consistent with other studies.

### 6.3 Work-related wellbeing

Work-related wellbeing describes wellbeing that individuals derive from their work, and include such elements as the level of engagement they experience at work, how meaningful their work is to them, or how much accomplishment they experience at work (Kern, 2014).

Statistically significant difference was reported across the overall work-related wellbeing. During Covid-19 leaders' wellbeing was higher than pre-Covid-19. Furthermore, they derived more meaning from work, reported a higher level of engagement and accomplishment as well as found their relationships at work more supportive than pre-Covid-19. No difference was found in leaders' experiences of positive and negative emotions. While there are no similar studies assessing individuals' work-related wellbeing before and during the pandemic, a once-off survey was carried with the primary school leaders in Ireland during the pandemic and demonstrated that post-primary leaders experienced higher levels of work-related wellbeing across all aspects except they felt less happy and more lonely at work

(Burke & Dempsey, 2021b). Further research is required to delve deeper into the differences between primary and post-primary school leaders' role to explain these findings.

*Table 5. Mean and standard deviation results for work-related wellbeing a month before Covid-19 and a year later.*

Wellbeing elements	Pre-Covid-19		During-Covid-19	
	M	SD	M	SD
Overall	7.60	1.23	7.89	1.41
Positive emotions at work	7.06	1.85	7.31	1.82
Engagement at work	7.84	1.58	8.14	1.68
Relationships at work	7.37	1.83	7.72	1.80
Meaning for work	8.36	1.63	8.69	1.62
Accomplishment	7.37	1.09	7.73	1.57
Negative emotions at work	5.29	1.96	5.49	1.81

Covid-19 required leaders to summon all their resources to cope effectively with the new normality of leading schools through a pandemic. As upsetting as it was it has also facilitated higher levels of wellbeing. This is consistent with research indicating that engagement increases when the challenge is higher and a leader has the skills that allow them to face it (Fullagar & Delle Fave, 2017). Also, past research supports the notion that while challenging times can test relationships, they have a tendency of bringing people closer to each other (Joseph, 2011; Lepore & Revenson, 2006). This was further explored in Ireland among teachers during the pandemic, many of whom reported their relations have developed during Covid-19 (Dempsey & Burke, 2021a). In relation to leaders deriving more meaning out of work, this finding is consistent with past research demonstrating an increase of meaningfulness as a result of struggle (Kashdan & Kane, 2011).

Taking all into consideration, the results are not surprising in relation to the increases of specific aspects of work-related wellbeing. More challenge, caused by Covid-19, resulted in leaders' deriving more wellbeing from work. However, given leaders' higher levels of stress, balance is required to sustain long-term benefits of challenge. When challenge becomes too

difficult to bear, it may lead to anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Ilies et al., 2017). Therefore, action needs to be taken to ensure the sustainability of leaders' wellbeing at work.

#### 6.4 Conclusion

During the pandemic, post-primary leaders' stress levels have increased compared with the pre-Covid-levels. This is not surprising given the additional duties they were tasked with to ensure health and safety of their school community. At the same time, leaders' personal wellbeing pre- and during-pandemic remained the same, as no differences were found in relation to their psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing. Finally, some aspects of leaders' work-related wellbeing increased as they began to derive more meaning from work, became more engaged and the difficulties they experienced made them feel more accomplished, compared with the pre-pandemic levels. Further research is required to both delve deeper into these findings and monitor their wellbeing long-term.

# Leading after Covid-19

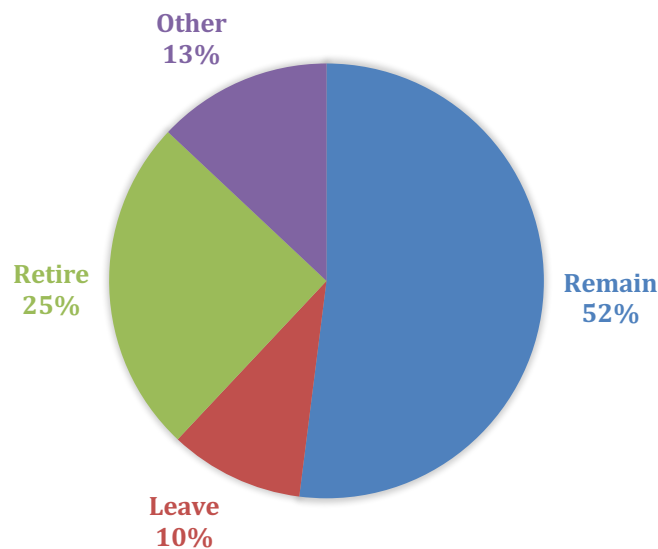


In this section, we will firstly identify post-primary school leaders' intention to leave. Then, detail what leaders suggest should be done in order to make leadership more attractive for them. Finally, we will present leaders' suggestions in relation to what they believe DES should do to improve education post-Covid-19.

### 7.1 Intention to leave

When asked where they see themselves in 5 years, half of the respondents reported they wish to remain in their position, 10% wanted to leave, and a quarter planned to retire. A total of 13% of leaders had other plans.

Figure 11. Intention to leave.



Compared with the primary school leaders, a smaller number of leaders intend to leave their appointment, however a similar percentage wish to remain (Burke and Dempsey, 2021). Given the large number of current leaders who are either certain they wish to leave, retire or ambivalent about their future position, it is imperative that action is taken to encourage leaders to stay and provide appropriate support to help them during this crisis.

#### 7.1.2 Where will you be in 5 years?

The following comments are a flavour of the qualitative responses to this question.

*I really love my job, but it takes a toll. I dread to think of what the workload will be like in 5 years. If things don't ease a little, I will leave the profession and look to start a new path in life. I love teaching. I love students. I love being a Principal; it's just that it's no longer good for my health.*

*Health issues may force my early retirement.*

One other respondent contends that “*The job is no longer about teaching and learning*”.

#### 7.1.2.1 Stay in my position

Some intend staying in the position but do point out the toll the year has taken on them.

*If my health allows, I hope to be still in my position. I enjoy my work, but these times have placed great stress, added pressure and demands on me. As a principal this was all new territory and myself and the deputy had to ensure that school was adjusted to fit every class and teacher for their return in August. I got five days summer holidays where I did not have to be in school. Halloween was taken up with hand gel. June and early July we had to oversee the Calculated Grades. November had the repeat Leaving Cert. It has been a fraught year for school managers. Burnout and health are a constant worry.*

*I'm unsure right now - I'd like to experience a couple of years of Principalship outside of the pandemic to have a better judgement of my work without all of the Covid-19 pressures of late.*

*I'm torn between staying in the job or going back to teaching. It's an all-consuming job with enormous expectations on us. The responsibility is daunting at times. I love the job but could do with a break or a holiday.*

*I have an open mind but would stay as Principal. Who knows what might happen? I have thought about what opportunities would there be for me if I left my current role. Unfortunately, I am too young to retire. I can't see any other role that I would be qualified to work in.*

*I would like to retire early but DES recognition re status, workload and salary would be rejuvenating.*

*I don't ever wish to be pessimistic, but I think leadership and principalship in particular has a certain life span and I need to plan no further than 2 years ahead. My family mean the most to me; they keep me going although doing this survey highlighted the amount of quality time, I spend on work rather than with those who are important to me.*

#### 7.1.2.2 Move within education

Some are considering moving within education

*I am seriously considering a sideways move as I just don't know how I'm going to keep up this level. It is a very busy school, a very large school with the expectations that go with that. The leadership team is fantastic, the work is shared, and I am supported, but there is no getting away from the long days and workload. This is especially a concern if I have a family- how can I justify then coming home from work at about 6 and opening the laptop again at 7? Life is short.*

*Academics - which I know I would find very dull but the fear of burnout in my role over the next few years is very concerning.*

*Get into a different area in education - move sideways.*

#### 7.1.2.3 Move out of education

Some plan to move out of the sector into a new role.

*Plan to do some job TOTALLY OUTSIDE OF EDUCATION for 4/5 years after this job.*

*Professionally, I now need a different challenge to that of leading the school however, this shouldn't/ can't be a backward step professionally.*

*There is no way I can physically or mentally continue in this role when one considers the expectations made of and responsibilities given to principals.*



*I don't want to be a Principal, will look elsewhere for employment outside of the Education Sector.*

*I plan to resign and follow a different career path.*

*I hope to take a new direction using my qualifications and experience. I am completing a Diploma at present in a new professional area which will help me to do so.*

#### 7.1.2.4 Some aspire to taking on the principal role

Some of the Deputy Principals do intend to take on principal roles in the coming years.

*I would love to stay in management, and I had ambition to be a principal, but I find that I am less satisfied in the role now that I was previously. I think what is expected of management is huge and there is no consideration of the extra workload we have faced. I have loved my job in the past, but this feeling is reducing as each month passes. It has become increasingly difficult to achieve a reasonable work/life balance and I easily do 2 to 3 hours work at home at night after working a 10 hour day in school.*

*I'm considering not taking up the principal role if it comes up. Physical/emotional/personal demands are too much. Have a young family and I think the demands of the job will prevent me from enjoying my family.*

#### 7.2 What changes would make your position more attractive?

The majority of the respondents talked about middle management structures. This was followed by administrative help and workload issues. There were a number of other suggestions, and all are presented in Figure 11. There were a few (less than 6) that said they saw no need for change in the role, of note here is that these were all in the DP role.

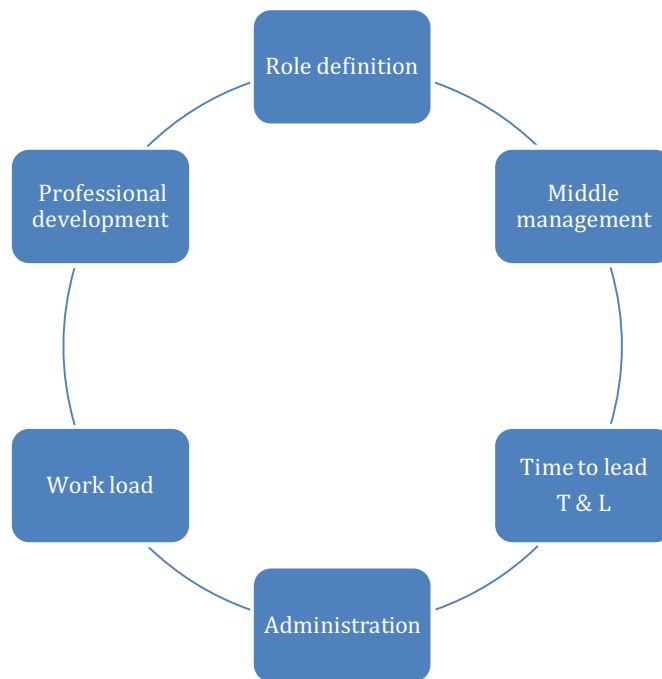
*None, it is extremely satisfying role.*

*I am quite happy with my position largely because I have a hugely supportive Principal and a staff I appreciate and enjoy.*

*I am very content in my position. I am in a very strong SMT team and am lucky to have another Deputy Principal work beside me sharing the role.*

*New to the position and happy so far.*

Figure 12 Changes needed to make leader role more attractive



### 7.2.1 Role definition

Many are asking for role definition; they feel the role is too complex as it is now described. This role definition is linked to other themes in this section such as the need for a middle management team and extra administrative support. The competences required for the role are defined by some literature as “Leader – Teaching and Learning; Leader – School Development; Leader – People and Teams Communication; Organisational Management and Administrative Skills; Self-Awareness and Self-Management” (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2018). This is a very broad set of skills and leaders are looking for a more defined role description.

*Completely revamped management structures in schools to make leadership more feasible and less focused on the principal. I feel totally overwhelmed and close to the limit. This worries me.*

*As a Principal I would suggest a full review of the role. The workload is excessive at this stage and making what should be a fantastic job v unattractive. More help is needed in providing assistance in HR, Plant management etc. to allow the Principal to do the job of leading teaching and learning. Letting us have the scheduled holidays.*

*Principal teachers are expected to lead significant change in their schools without being given real powers to do so. Some of the most significant changes have happened as a result of teachers having to use technology that they would otherwise never have done. Necessity is.... The level of compliance and reporting has made the job just one enormous administrative burden. I work in the ETB sector and in the last couple of years a whole new layer of appointments were made Director A, B, C... these have only further added to the stress, workload and admin burden on principals. Equally there isn't consistency across all of them where different practices exist, especially around the area of recruitment, procurement, BOM's. I need my own personal PA. The CL on Posts of Responsibility needs to be more explicit to prevent AP's playing both sides. Principals have a job to do and in trying to implement whatever it is either to enhance the T and L or to keep the school compliant they need to be able to rely on their management team for support and not opposition. Guaranteed holidays, uninterrupted! Finally, and while I'm not an advocate for the stick approach there has to be some sanctions that can be readily and easily employed. It seems everything now is 'refer them to the employee's assistance programme'.*

*The job has become too big for one person. So many colleagues are burned out. There is a feeling that no one cares. We are cannon fodder for the department. New problem - dump it on principals. Issue - blame it on principals. There is a command and control attitude at the top and if we don't obey - send in an inspector and publicly shame.*

*Better support from the Dept and more of a work/life balance. Possibly allowing assistant principals more responsibility to alleviate pressures.*

*Proper respect and support, recognition that work overload is destroying people - very little real time for a thing other than work and family. Personal time is nonexistent.*

*That we get paid for the extra hours we work - Calculated Grades, extra time for orals and other things that keep getting put our way and we are expected to do it for nothing. Exam Aides and others get extra, we don't.*

### 7.2.2 Middle management

Many responses were calling for more middle management posts. They are also looking for a restructuring of middle management so that more distributive leadership is possible.

*A second Deputy Principal for all schools over 650.*

*More support, 2nd and 3rd Deputies should be appointed before 700 and 900 is reached as the workload is massive.*

*I feel that all DEIS schools should have a second Deputy Principal. This would reflect the scale of the workload involved in managing and leading DEIS schools. If this was available, it would allow my workload to become manageable, I could focus on my priorities as a school leader, and I would have the work-life balance that would support better personal wellbeing.*

*More API and APII appointments. Communication from DES with arrangements as soon as is possible to avoid speculation and worry from school community.*

*Having recognition from the DES that we are working beyond any expectations of Principal's at any time before. That middle management and senior management structures need to be improved. Positive engagement from the buildings unit re our poor situation.*

Many mentioned the need for a post for leading Additional/ Special Education Needs at school level.

*More in-school supports would be welcome. In fact, I believe every school in the country should have a leadership position for a Special Education Needs Coordinator that is separate to the Ap1 and AP2 leadership posts.*

There was a call for more distributed leadership in these data with a call for clear definition of the DP role. As one principal said, 'I sign everything'. This is an issue that would merit more scrutiny around the opportunities for more devolved roles at middle management.

*It is time to give real responsibility to the Leadership and Management Team. I sign everything in this school. Every new circular places more work and responsibility on the principal. It is time to change this. I should be the leader of a team and each member of the team should have to take full responsibility of their area and sign-off on the paperwork required for the DE in that area. There is no point in giving increased POR if there is no real accountability attached to them. Another DP would be nice. And a chance to take a break at Easter and during the summer would be nice. Apparently, I am working this Easter without being consulted. I might have taken time off at the mid-term had I known this!*

*More distributed leadership with responsibility attached. More quality free time. Job Sharing. An emphasis on Wellbeing at management level.*

*That certain positions in school have automatic posts (e.g.) SEN coordinator, IT coordinator. Increased funding to manage the school (painting, upgrading of physical building, continuation of the ICT Digital Strategy grant, etc.)*

*Supporting a middle layer of management further by the DE, with a time allocation for specific teaching and learning posts and specific training. All teachers are now so time poor that AP2 posts are still task based and serve to divvy up the "jobs" but not necessarily adding value to the distributed leadership that P/DPs need.*

*I think having additional help. At senior management level i.e., an additional deputy principal would greatly help. Also, middle management taking on not only tasks, but a leadership element to their role.*

*Having developed middle leadership teams. Administrative Officer to take responsibility for Admin and Building related areas.*

*Meaningful succession planning, restoration of posts.*

*More meaningful management support system (POR).*

*More time allocated to middle management so that we can delegate them more responsibility. We have wonderful people in these AP positions but without sufficient time allocations they cannot get fully immersed in the roles. Also, more guidance hours are needed for schools as the level of need amongst our students is growing each day and the guidance team can only meet so many students.*

*Stronger senior leadership and better supports for assistant principals in helping them to manage their workload. The middle leader is taking the bulk of the workload in schools especially from the deputy principal but without the financial gain.*

*The workload for both Principals and Deputy Principals is unsustainable. The responsibilities are huge:- leading teaching and learning/health and safety/planning/administration/maintenance/self-evaluation etc. with not enough posts of responsibility to distribute enough of the workload.*

However, one leader felt the increased role for middle management was diluting their role.

*I work in a large school with 3 Deputy Principals. I believe that there is no need for some many in the Senior Leadership positions - the good job that I did on my own has been diluted - too much discussion times and too many meetings rather than actually doing the work of a DP!*

The Deputy Principals who responded are also looking for more distributive leadership.

*Genuine distributed leadership. Role of DP acknowledged by P, BOMs, DES.*

*Extra DP to share responsibilities, too much supervision in the current role with full responsibility for discipline which is very wearing as the years pass.*

*Support for Deputy Principals- It's there for Principals, Career Guidance Counsellors, teachers but not DP's. JMB have us involved in updates and bulletins since the pandemic but not before this and maybe not after either. DP's do a huge amount of extra work especially in these times with no acknowledgement from most parties. It is after all a huge TEAM effort.*

*Dedicated administrative supports, similar to an executive PA so as I can keep on top of all the disparate elements of the role. A renewed relationship with the DES following their abject leadership throughout the pandemic.*

*Again - some additional Admin staff or PA. A greater feeling of control and feeling part of decision making at a national level.*

*Admin needs to be reduced, more tangible support from the DES and inspectorate.*

*Opportunities for 3 month to 1 year sabbatical or work placement in DE after 7 -10 years - build capacity. Refresher courses for those over 10 years I role- greater emphasis on high performance leadership.*

*Less teaching time for DP so she is more available to support me in the running of the school Flexibility to work from home occasionally Respect for holidays and not an expectation that Principals will just find a way to get everything done even if that means enormous personal sacrifices.*

*Time to do it properly. While I said that I want to stay in the same position or become a Principal I will be too burnt out in a year or two to stay.*

### 7.2.3 Time for leading teaching and learning

Leaders want to get more time to lead teaching and learning as they see this a key aspect of their role.

*Extra support around general school management allowing me to focus on the academic planning, wellbeing and general ethos and vision of the school. The day to day finance, admin, school planning for construction and battle to get this moving is very stressful. Dealing with public who don't get what is happening behind the scenes.*

*Trying to hold on to the excellent teachers when we don't have enough allocation in a growing school to give them full contracts. All adds to the pressure.*

*Less admin and/or more time for thinking about/ planning/engagement with learning and teaching. At the moment the job is mostly admin.*

*The role of Principal needs to be better supported so that less decision making goes through the Principal, a leader of learning and teaching should not also manage building maintenance.*

*Space and time to finish projects without being constantly side-tracked by mundane day-to-day issues that could/should be dealt with by middle leaders (if we had enough posts!!)*

*More help and assistance with the building, a full DP and opportunity to lead teaching and learning by reducing the administrative facilities work.*

*I feel that this position is one that you should only take on if you have passion for the students that are under your care and also care about the teaching and learning that is being provided. It takes dedication due to the overwhelming workload. It is a privilege to do this job. Last summer took its toll because of very little time off, no travel etc. I think getting a break makes all the difference. I do appreciate that the DES this year have organised all the LC accredited grades systems in May June which means that we will get a break. Holidays are extremely important. We need to be able to just recharge and that should be sacrosanct.*

*The most attractive and what should be the most important part of my position is 'leading learning'. However, there are so many different demands that very little time can be spent on this. More supports- deputies, APs and administration is required - to allow Principals to be what they are meant to be. There is also a need for progression routes from Principalship to other roles - if you become a Principal at a relatively young age - you shouldn't be waiting for retirement to give you a break from what is a very very demanding (albeit rewarding) position.*



*Lessen administrative load. Let me concentrate on teaching and learning. Reduce burden of ultimate responsibility.*

*I look forward to being able to meet in person with fellow Principals and DPs again - miss this social and supportive element hugely.*

#### 7.2.4 Administrative help

Many leaders are asking for additional administrative help. When administration is taken away there is more time for leading teaching and learning.

*More administrative support to cut down on paperwork and allow time to interact more with the students.*

*An administrative officer to help with the bureaucracy.*

*More help with paperwork.*

*The workload is becoming unmanageable, more support from both an admin and leadership (extra post holders) point of view would be amazing to share some of the workload with.*

*I think the job can be a very lonely one. Covid-19 has removed many of the parts of school that are joyous. It will be great to be back to some kind of normality post vaccine. All schools should have much more admin support - HR or a company secretary type role.*

*More admin support. More SNA and teacher allocation. Being able to take time off Less pressure from DES initiatives.*

*While I understand this is an impossible ask but less paperwork, please. I have found myself inundated with paperwork about paperwork and it can be overwhelming A personal assistant to help with administration duties. Less paperwork so I can spend more time with people. A better relationship with the department. A salary that matches the responsibility I have.*

*Less paperwork and box ticking -we have gone so much in the corporate direction; schools are not what they used to be - they need to be managed alright but it's almost becoming micromanagement now .There must be a happy medium out there somewhere-all it means is less time for the real important people in the school -the students and also the teachers in a way.*

*More admin support, a better building - aesthetics in the working environment would greatly support morale of staff and myself. A continuing supportive Deputy Principal, assurance that school holidays can be taken and not interrupted upon.*

#### 7.2.5 Work life balance

The lack of support is impacting on leaders work life balance. A more realistic work life balance would make the position more attractive to new entrants.

*More respect for holidays of management. More respect for out-of-hours (no emails after 4pm nor on weekends, not during holidays) This it is also big turnoff for younger staff to see how much our holidays are interfered with; this is impacting on the number of quality teachers putting themselves forward for promotion. Not having to fight crazy battles seeking basic funding for health and safety. Reduce the roll-out of new initiatives; let things settle in - there are too many things that are still unfamiliar and area very serious matters to embed well into school life (new Child Protection inspections; new JC; new LC; GDPR to name a few.*

*Make more time for myself and my family, at the moment I am totally absorbed in my work, and I KNOW I am neglecting other areas of my life, but I feel I have no choice as school is so busy and there seems to be no end to the workload presently!*

*More work/life balance.*

*An extra API if not two extra A{P!'s to schools with a time allocation allowance so that the workload would mostly get done during the school day. My school day is 8.30 to 5.20pm on site and another hour or more at night depending on where in the school calendar I am.*

*Midterm breaks being me time and not having to rush down to the school to see are the wipes we had ordered not fit for purpose. For major announcements in education not to be made late in the week leading into a break. For designated times for schools to close and for society to understand that. For Ireland's unhealthy fascination with the Leaving Cert to stop.*

*A working week of less than an average of 55 hours p/week.*

*More manageable workload and workdays. I don't think there is an accurate understanding of what exactly being done by school leaders. Support such as IT support etc. would also help this. We are leading learning and managing the school and people- no other organisation does this anywhere. Perhaps more hands on assistance with the creation of policies- someone from the inspectorate or your patron body, e.g., ETB, could actually link in with your school and help you compile it. This would also alleviate a lot of work.*

*The workload is unsustainable. The expectations of what a principal is solely responsible for are unrealistic. Middle management training and development would be a huge help. Providing time for post-holders to do their duties would also be a big help. Defining the working day and what you can ask for during "free" classes. That the school holidays are devoted to my family, and I am not expected to be working through holidays.*

*The amount of work a Principal is expected to do is insane. The more you have a good culture of distributed leadership the better for the school and you. However, if you inherit a school lacking in this it is very tough. The inequity of resources, and in particular human resources and leadership support is dreadful. You are so finely stretched you lose your moral purpose. I think this is what has happened to me. The ridiculous and relentless demands from the department and the sense of burnout from the staff ebbs your passion from you. Teachers in the past were far more ambitious and enthusiastic. They engaged better in extracurricular. I think that is all dying out. The morale of the teachers has a very big impact on the principal. I am too young to retire but I will take early retirement. I have no life since I started this job.*

*A greater appreciation from the Dept in particular of our experience and professionalism. More trust less big brother.*

*I love being a school Principal, I love the students and the school I am in but after 10 years of this job and particularly after this last year I am drained. If I could take a career break even for just 1 year it would allow me to revitalise myself and go again.*

#### 7.2.6 Professional development

Professional development for leaders would help make the role more attractive.

*More professional support- coaching. Stronger representative body, feeling that TUI and ASTI are better at representing teachers interests than Senior Leaders interests. Allowing more autonomy to leaders. Amount of bureaucracy is mind blowing. I'm in ETB school and I do not feel supported by ETB but rather hindered.*

*As stated above, organised CPD / meeting time with other principals through DES and NAPD leadership. Three times per year. Misneach is not enough. It needs to continue throughout the career of a Principal.*

*A greater emphasis on leadership over management, breaking the shackles of the 'Management myth'. The 'let management deal with it' attitude is very wearing, all teachers are professional, more professional accountability would be desirable- less of a blame culture.*

*Get the DES to halt all new initiatives for a few years to allow recovery. Mandatory wellbeing days for SMT. Coaching for SMT has been rolled out - excellent initiative - DPs need it very quickly.*

*More professional development for all SMT on time management and coaching.*

In conclusion, the leaders who responded to this survey are saying that there is a need for more support for leaders, this support is in the form of role definition, additional middle management, additional administration supports, attention to their workload, time for leading learning and professional development.

### 7.3 Improving education post-Covid-19

In response to this 'big question' on how to improve education there were many very insightful responses. Four main themes were generated from the data, communication, assessment reform, teaching and learning and resourcing of our schools. Each is discussed below with relevant quotes from the respondents. Many quotes straddle the four themes. The following examples will give a flavour of some of the responses.

*Change the reliance on state exams and the entry to college. Increase college places give all students a chance to go to college as they do in other countries. Reduce class sizes. Give us enhanced S and S as in Covid-19 times. Give schools more in school admin support (increase the grant). Stop piling on work and indicatives on Principals. Give schools more autonomy each school would have made the best decision to suit their own school community. Focus on health first 'Maslow before Bloom'.*

*Create a management support team that have recent management experience that assist and support school management. Provide all school with minimum full Deputy allocation, a home school liaison and full guidance hours. Provide better career opportunities for principals to feedback into the education system. Get rid of the junior certificate and JCT. Provide Term Assessments and Modules for students to build a portfolio of achievement. Have a Teaching Council that serves the profession in a meaningful way. Completely scrap the existing Teaching Council structure. Create a better Leaving certificate programme. This should also be modular, based on building credits and offering opportunities for sitting exams for extra credit and allowing student to leave with some basic attainment over two years. Create an alternative 6th year that provides apprenticeship and training for non-academic students. Develop a forum for engagement of principal voice along with other stakeholders. Develop digital skills, reduce PME to one year and solve the substitution deficits. Value teachers and teaching by paying well.*

*A break from new initiatives. When we return to "normal" we will need to re-enter a consolidation phase in education. We need to give students and teachers a time to catch up.*

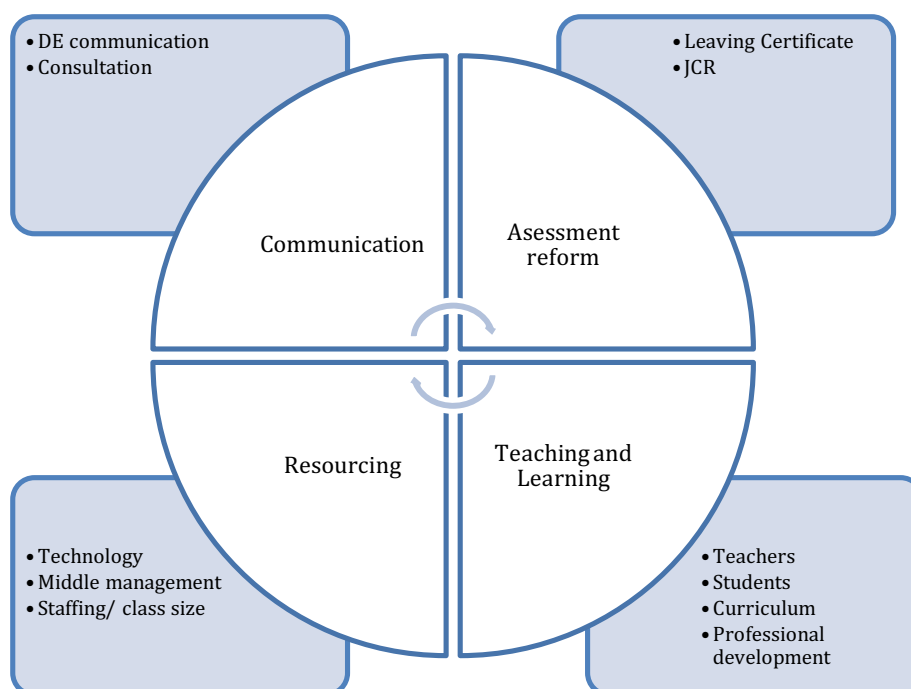
*A Clear backup plan to be formulated now in case something like this happens again. 2. Schools should be informed of what is happening before the media. 3. Principals and Deputy Principals should have a much stronger voice at the table about what is achievable in schools in times like this - They are the ones best placed to take into consideration all of the factors involved and do their best daily for their schools. 4. Less time should be spent by the DES on these "Response plans" and more on practical implementation that will actually improve schools. 5. The changes to teaching over the last year have given us enormous opportunities which should be encouraged and enhanced by the DES after COVID-19 (e.g., Teachers have fully engaged in remote learning, are comfortable on several different platforms and can see the value of how they can use these tools long into their teaching careers).*

*Block off the first month of school where Principals are given leeway to simply create fun for their school community. We need to reset. Regroup. Review, and come into our own again. Valuable social connection time has been lost. It is important that academic catch up is not the mantra. Extra teaching allocation to support AEN students and those who have had mental health issues due to isolation. Extra counselling hours allocation to support those grieving family and friends lost to the pandemic. Extra wellbeing hours for sports and extracurricular activities.*

*Stop with the obsession about leaving cert, it belittles everything else we do in schools. It has completely dominated the country when we should have been focused on much more important things. It's frustrating that our Minister thinks it is the be all and end all. It's entirely uninspiring.*

Figure 13 below provides an overview of the main themes from this section of the research.

Figure 13. Areas for reform.



### 7.3.1 Communication

As in previous reports with primary leaders (Burke and Dempsey 2020, 2021; Dempsey and Burke 2020), the post-primary leaders are also calling for more open communication and coupled with this many asked for more consultation and an understanding of their role. This respondent put it succinctly.

*Ask Principals to advise and guide; Communicate early and often; Understand our role and responsibilities.*

#### 7.3.1.1 Department of Education Communication

Leaders are appealing to DE to look at the timing of their correspondence with leaders. As one put it “we need communication in time so we can work with our team, not Friday evening”. They are asking for respectful communication.

*Be respectful of school leaders and demonstrate trustful communication and be decisive and stop being political. Very, very disappointed with Norma Foley.*

The logistics involved in organising assessment for large numbers of students needs to be accounted for in DE time scales.

*Contingency planning on the part of the DES has been very poor. The quality of the documentation - while well produced - did not arrive in a timely manner or in substantial detail. The work that we did was started well in advance of DES guidance as it all arrived too late for it to be practical and useful in a school of our size. Large schools with in excess of 200 pupils in Senior Cycle year and 300 in Junior Cycle year groups cannot turn some of the actions asked of by the department in the timescale given.*

*Clear, timely communication. Answering phones, get active principals involved in decision making.*

*Admin staff for school to free leaders for leading learning. Review of assessment at Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert. Review the manner and style of communication with school leaders.*

*Effective communication channels. No circulars after 5 on a Friday evening.*

*The Department need to review their approach and lack of planning. Inspectors would be better used if they set about drawing up a plan rather than ticking boxes in their interactions with principals.*

*Timely, clear guidance. Not Friday evening emails with attachments when it's too late / inappropriate to work with your team.*

*One clear message not leaked or delivered in a haphazard way - one voice only. Please stop sending materials in the evenings and at the weekends - our right to any work life balance has disappeared.*

*Releasing documents and circulars earlier in the week. Friday evening release has become a running joke but in reality, it is far from a joke. As leaders of our schools, we naturally read the documents on Friday evenings/nights, and it impacts on our whole weekends. Receiving a note from my 8 year old son saying "I'm sorry that you have to work so hard" broke my heart this time.*



*Contact schools directly with information, do NOT use the media or social media platforms. Have a plan in place for the future in the event of school closures. Ensure all schools are doing the same thing. Provide training for teachers on remote learning e.g., what works best - all classes live or a mixture of live and recorded classes and assignments classes.*

*Clear communication and not just a slew of circulars - produce circulars by all means but give a clear synopsis of the key points, the sheer volume of paperwork to read through has been detrimental to the main work of school leaders; contingency planning and not reacting, their seems to be proactive joined-up thinking.*

*Respect for school management. We have been treated as if we are completely invisible. We had no voice during the pandemic. A separate union for school management or a section within current unions to support school leaders. Clear communication to school management. Stop using the media to kite fly ideas.*

Coupled with this request for respectful communication was a call to consult with school leaders.

#### 7.3.1.2 Consultation with school leaders

There is a strong call from school leader for collaboration on key policy decisions. This two way communication should be prioritised in the coming years.

*Better planning and structures. Better consultation directly with School leaders (surveys and focus groups from actual school leaders and not just management bodies and unions).*

*More communication, but not at 5.30pm on a Friday afternoon. Find a way to allow Principals and Deputies to have more of a voice at the highest levels since we're the ones who end up enforcing/implementing directives and could add a greater understanding of the practical obstacles on the ground.*

*Please consider the principals and the work involved for us.*

*Regular meetings with stakeholders. More engagement with NAPD as they represent the leaders.*

*Lead by collaboration rather than threats.*

*DES needs to listen to its client base and be more adaptable. We have been able to adapt as we are versatile and innovative. The DES appears reluctant to change. Communication is also an obvious problem.*

*Plan, plan, plan. And then communicate with principals directly BEFORE leaking to the media. Seek advice from principals before making daft decisions.*

*Communicate more. Collaborate more and inform school leaders of changes before it's in the media. Give us time to read the guidelines and prepare for the instant questions from staff, students and parents. Respect that it takes time to produce presentations on these guidelines for meetings. Appreciate that the school community expects the school leaders to have the answers. It became evident that time and space is needed for all to reflect and think during the introduction of new policies. This should become common practice.*

*Visit a school and see what actually happens on a day to day basis, a lot has changed since the 60s.*

*Pause new initiatives and listen to teachers and school leaders when prioritising.*

Coupled with this collaboration is the need to define the role of the school leader and to communicate this to key stakeholders.

*DES needs to seriously rethink the work of principals and the pressure on them. It is unsustainable.*

*More resources. Rethink the role of principal. Remove the admin end of it (e.g., building /policies/HR) while leaving the teaching and learning/curriculum.*

*The complexity and strain of the role needs to be acknowledged and properly remunerated.*

*Clear plans, DES keep throwing out autonomy but that means every principal has to start from scratch. Ridiculous that Deputies weren't made ex quota. Department says schools will....99% of the time, that means 1 or 2 people will.*

Consultation on the role and having an option for a career break would make the role more attractive to new entrants.

*Any advisory board in the future should include a random selection of working principals and teachers. The people at the top of JMB, ETBI NAPD, ASTI, TUI etc. are either too far removed from the ground or have too much of their own agendas in play. I am one of the longest serving Principals in our area ( I'd love to know but I expect on average people do about 6 years in the job.). I am still amongst the youngest in our area, the nature of the demands and long hours are putting people off the role. The reality is I spend way more time with and worrying about other people children more than my own. I think if people thought you could take a career break as a Principal more people would go into it, and it would also allow other people to act up and see if they like the job and the responsibility. It would build leadership capacity.*

### 7.3.2 Assessment reform

The majority of the respondents are looking for assessment reform, with the LC the most mentioned area. However, there are other areas that also need reform. Some general comments from this area are presented below. Looking forward there is concern for all class groups and many are calling for assessment reform to reflect the impact of COVID-19 pandemic distance learning. This respondent is calling for a public debate on the topic.

*All schools to be facilitated with the necessary resources to run homework clubs, or other after school activities that will allow kids to learn how to socialise together again. Consideration should now be given to reforming assessment and certification for the LC. If calculated grades are deemed acceptable for 2 years what about our current 5th year students? Have they not missed out on the same level of formal*

*schooling? What exceptions be made for them? It's time to start this debate publicly. DE should consider opening up provision for students who need catch up during the summer. Also, all state exam components need to happen during Easter or at other times when schools are not open for formal classes*

*Set guidelines for schools on assessment-consistent approach to assessment and reporting to parents i.e.: Term 1/2/3/4 assessments for all with feedback to parents after each assessment on VSware etc.*

This respondent reminds us that the LC is not fair and needs reform. The also remind us of the other senior cycle offerings of LCA and TY.

*-Leaving Certificate and Senior Cycle reform is badly needed. there is a national obsession with the Leaving Certificate which is unhealthy. Aspects of the Leaving Certificate provide the illusion of fairness, but it is not fair for a variety of reasons. It is outdated given the world that we live in, and the focus of learning should not all be directed towards the exam. I also think the LCA programme, which is an excellent programme, deserves greater promotion. The TY programme has huge potential, but consensus is required on what we, as a country, want the purpose of TY to be.*

*Commitment to overhaul of assessment at all stages of second-level education. Real acknowledgement of challenges facing students from socially and economically disadvantaged communities, those with additional needs and those who struggle in any number of other ways.*

Other respondents are calling for a change to the timing of assessments.

*Revise Leaving cert exam structure- orals/ practical exams in 5th yr., paper 1 in certain exams in 5th yr. etc. Provide schools with adequate teacher allocation and adequate budgets.*

*Timetabling the oral and practical work during the Easter holidays is a great help.*

*Communication and a commitment to school infrastructure improvement. Urgent reform of LC based on a model of continuous assessment. Invest in an e-learning approach to classroom practice while embedding key skills relevant to today's society*

*Part of LC in English, Irish and Maths paper one sat in first year of exam and possibly components of some other subjects could be completed in year one.*

*Streamline assessment. Reduce subject options. Implement the 400 hours wellbeing time More holistic approach to education, reduce the large end heavy burden on students with LC state exam current model is outdated. The focus of assessment and education should be to prepare students for life not for a one final exam.*

### 7.3.2.1 Leaving Certificate Reform

In many of the responses on the topic of reforming the LC there were three clear messages, one the need to uncouple the LC from third level entry, an exploration of some kind of modularisation of the LC and the need for elements of continuous assessment. The clear message from this period is that the students not sitting the LC in June happened and schools adapted and in doing so there has been a change in attitude to teachers assessing students' work.

*They are going to have to start with rebuilding relationships with their schools. I have more questions than solutions unfortunately... If nothing else Covid-19 has highlighted what we already knew about the Leaving Cert acting as a filter for 3rd level entry. Is that its only purpose? Can we ever untangle this unholy marriage? Having had no terminal exams for Junior Cycle for two years... is that a bad thing? Educational change has often taken a cautious pace in Ireland, Covid-19 has shown us that teachers can adapt to new learning experiences more quickly. Let's hope it doesn't require future pandemics to replicate this speed!*

*More options for assessment for Leaving Cert, e.g., more coursework options. Revamp the LCA in terms of courses and content. LCVP needs to be reviewed and revamped also or discontinued.*

*To change the weighting given to terminal high stakes exams. Continuous assessment and teachers grades should account for the bulk of the LC marks.*

*This is the opportunity to change the structure of assessment for the LC and move away from the dependence on a final exam.*

*The Department must look at the way we assess students. Replace JC and LC current terminal assessment scenario with something similar to LCA, i.e., 4 sessions with some form of official assessment at the end of each session. No more reliance on one terminal assessment period. Marks gathered over time, reduce the burden if we find ourselves in a calculated grades situation again. Divorce 2nd level achievement from 3rd level entry.*

*It is URGENT that we move from a singular leaving cert exam to a system of continuous assessment over 2 years. There is a role for both exams and teacher assigned grades. But the day of a single exam determining a student's entry into college or future in work is gone, gone, gone.*

*Revise the exam system structure - continuous assessment should be a factor.*

*An urgent review of the LC examination - current 2nd year and 3rd year students will be at a great disadvantage when progressing to senior cycle owing to time missed in the pandemic. Supporting schools with additional allocations to work with these students in smaller class sizes so that they can be supported in their learning.*

*Realise that proper planning is essential, Keep investment along lines of Digital learning strategy. Do something to reduce focus on LC. It is clear that the tail is wagging the dog now. The focus on LC exam during pandemic is farcical given that 25% of students drop out in first year of college. Ministry of Higher education a good initiative .*

*To change the Leaving Cert so that all does not depend on one terminal exam. This is the greatest stress on our students, in or out of Covid-19, and yet the DES continue to insist on it to the detriment of students. If the HEIs were made to find an alternative method for the selection of students onto their courses, as they do in many other countries, then this would go a long way to sorting out the mess that is currently the LC, irrespective of any proposed syllabus change, which won't have the same effect!*

*Urgent reworking of Leaving Cert needed to include a continuous assessment component. More training for teachers in blended learning. More funding for technology in schools. More focus needed on assessment for learning.*

### 7.3.2.2 Junior Cycle Reform

There is not as much focus on Junior Cycle in responses and where it is mentioned there is a consensus that there is a need to not have students sitting a Junior Cycle examination. The need for CBAs to get more recognition is mentioned by respondents.

*Keep the huge investment in digital technologies in school and digital literacy too. Revise the Junior Cycle to do away with the Assessment Tasks - keep the good quality CBAs and add value to them by giving them a decent percentage for the actual examinations!*

*Less bureaucracy and jargon in the administration of the Junior Cycle - clear aims in terms of the specifications and CBAs.*

*Scrap CBAs or assign them more weighting - they are becoming stressors for teachers and students.*

*Ditch the Junior Cycle final state exams. Reform the LC urgently. Fund DEIS schools, with teacher allocations, to allow for staff to engage smaller groups with less traditional programmes. The one-size-fits-all, at Junior cycle, is a failure of meeting the needs of poverty ridden disadvantaged students. We are not short of creativity or enthusiasm.... just allocation!*

*Reducing CBAs at Junior level. Less reactionary decisions by the DES. Forward notice to enable planning.*

*Scrap Junior Cert, a waste of time as now too many CBAs and teachers haven't time with them to actually teach.*

*Scrap the JCT, seriously look at the pupil teacher ratio, our classrooms are not fit for purpose.*

### 7.3.3 Curriculum , Teaching and Learning

Leaders had some interesting proposals regards curriculum, teaching and learning. In particular there was a call to build on the skills developed during distance education and to move to more blended and technology embedded learning in schools. This concept of blended learning merits further exploration and how technology can support the engagement in, and enhancement of , the learning experience.

#### 7.3.3.1 Curriculum

There are some suggestions for the curriculum and the need for students to be given time to re-adjust after distance education. There is also a call for assessment reform that will impact on curriculum.

*There is a lot to be learned from COVID-19 for example the benefit of recorded lessons for difficult concepts is something that I would like to implement in my school when we get through the pandemic.*

*Reduce Wellbeing hours – counterproductive. Remove Religion from schools.*

*Time for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other. Teachers are amazing and willing to give when they can see the advantages of giving their time - teachers will do all they can for students.*

*A wellbeing plan nationwide for students. One that runs for all students and is advertised nationally and is accessible for all.*

*Work with partners to agree amended/shortened curricula and exams for current 2nd and 5th years next year. Keep up the digital grant funding to allow us to ensure that we have sufficient laptops available to use within classrooms and we can continue to upgrade our IT systems; Increase and improve guidance provision in the school - students wellbeing needs individual support meetings, and we are eroding our teacher allocation in order to provide sufficient guidance counselling support for students.*

There was some respondent that want a more supportive leading learning role for the inspectorate.



*Let the schools get on with the work at hand. Too many inspections at the moment. Way too much emphasis on monitoring schools rather than helping them. That should be the role of the inspectorate. The pandemic has shown what schools can do, with no help from the department. I showed how lacking the Department has been, the infrastructure i.e., inspectorate just collapsed in the pandemic. If they were more supportive, their roles would have been more defined, and it would have continued.*

*The Hybrid mix needs to become part of Teaching and Learning. DES needs to be more supportive to schools regarding inspections and to recognise the great work in teaching and learning that has taken place.*

### 7.3.3.2 Teaching

Leaders express the opinion that blended learning will be more prevalent in the coming years and there is a need to build on the skills teachers have developed during distance education. However, this also requires investment in technological infrastructure so that the digital divide is not added and exacerbating inequalities in education.

*Start to treat teachers with the respect they deserve.*

*Recognising limits of teachers and their expertise e.g., Psychology, social work, too much pressure put on them to provide solutions without training.*

*To remember the professionalism, experience, expertise and professional judgement of teachers and School leaders when making decisions.*

*The inspectorate needs to refocus their efforts on actually supporting school leaders, working with schools for school improvement, one step at a time. Reduce the number of initiatives. Pick one area of improvement and work at it for a five year period i.e., follow their own advice. Support schools in the area of IT. Our teachers have developed wonderful new skills in blended learning. Let's try and embed these in the classroom over the next five - ten years.*

*A mix of blended learning is essential in our journey forward so it can become a normal way of teaching rather than an emergency way. Upskill teachers on IT!!! By providing the funding needed to equip teachers with the resources and material required there was a better attitude towards learning new skills and engaging in CPD. Teacher's need to be furnished with relevant tools in order to learn, apply and practice using new and innovative technologies in the classroom. Also, the DES needs to embed in the teacher training that staying abreast of technological advances throughout ones career is a must for everyone. For far too long some teachers have been able resist developing their tech skills. It just should be a given that throughout their careers teachers must up-skill their tech abilities annually.*

*- smaller class sizes - a reduced teaching contact hours for teachers to allow 1hr per week admin time. - Additional posts of responsibility to allow for distribution of leadership roles - No Friday circulars- release documents early each week to reduce stress - Have a far greater and more transparent communication stream between the Dept and schools.*

*Options for a blended approach for teachers after Covid-19. Also coming up with a national option for students like ischool in DEIS (SCP) schools especially for students who will continue to be vulnerable or attending treatment in hospital.*

*Dedicated and directed wellbeing sessions for teachers. The portal provided is a great tool, but I do not think a lot of teachers have time to engage with it. Rethinking of assessment at LC level.*

*Support teachers in being able to do their job. Ensure workplaces are safe. Do not leave the bulk of the supervision/clearing up work to management who may also have their own classes to teach.*

### 7.3.3.3 Students and Learning

Many of concerns for students were around helping them with their mental health challenges and addressing inequalities in educational provision and AEN support.

*NEPS and counsellors deployed on the ground to schools.*

*Greater access to educational support services (NEPS etc.). More funding for assessments, or personnel to help - huge waiting list for CAHMs and we are struggling with students with mental health issues. More timely information - most guidelines come well after they are needed. Please no late Friday evening mails which are very stress inducing. Extra teacher allocations for next year to allow us to devote more time to students who have struggled during remote learning. No teaching hours for school DPs - it is an almost impossible job trying to teach, assess and manage school admin. Dedicated IT support in school - not left to DP or interested staff member.*

*More access to Guidance/counselling services for students. The level of mental health issues amongst our young people is at critical levels.*

*Putting in place supports to help with those experiencing Mental Health difficulties. We also had a critical incident during the past year. Very little support. Waiting lists of up to a year with local services. Continue with Covid-19 teaching supports so students can continue in small classes so that they can catch up on work lost due to Pandemic. Some supports for Principals and Deputies - We have had no proper holidays over the past year - even a few personal days would be of huge help (and would cost nothing!).*

*Appoint another full time counsellor Continue to have the mantra of 'slowing down to catch up' to engage students in school again and bridge the gap. Support teachers in training for identifying gaps in learning. Have more NEPS support with reports done quickly.*

*Reduce class size, more counselling services to school e.g., increases career guidance allocation.*

Some students thrived in the online environment and there is a call to have a more blended approach to learning going forward.

*The idea of more flexible approach to learning especially with blended learning-some students with anxiety issues actually enjoyed/thrived on this way of learning.*

#### 7.3.4 Professional development

There were some comments on professional development, but many refer to CPD in supporting the integration of technology which is covered in the next section on resources.

*Built in days where schools/teachers have to have in-service that suits them. JCT whole school days but with the school agenda. V little time to plan, short or long term - staff meetings are short.*

*Continuing with online access to CPD.*

*IT training for Principals. When new principal is appointed that they are training alongside existing deputies and likewise for newly appointed deputies. Greater training for middle and senior management together. Much better CPD for all.*

*Increase Guidance hours for schools - Let the Inspectorate continue to link in with schools to give support and guidance rather than critique - Increase student: teacher ratio - Specify a set number of days in which online learning is to take place in each school year - Increase IT grants for schools - Liaise with CPD providers to make provisions to continue with webinars and online CPD. I am not suggesting that this should replace face to face sessions as these are too powerful a learning experience to lose. However, as a busy parent I feel that I can still learn from online sessions in the evening or at the weekend without losing too much precious family time.*

#### 7.3.5 Resourcing schools

There are a number of areas that need additional resources according to leaders' responses. These include investment in middle management, investment in smaller class sizes and other physical support. The most called for resource is investment in technology and this is as a result of the pandemic experience of distance education. There is a need to invest on supporting more embedding of technology into the learning experience moving forward. As

one leader observed “we will never have another snow day”, learning will continue while schools are closed.

#### 7.3.5.1 Investment in Middle Management

This theme is recurring throughout the data. There is a definite message for policy makers that the management structure of second level schools needs review.

*Extra deputy Principal posts to relieve pressure on Principals - investment in IT and training / the DES is a dysfunctional organisation with too many political agendas.*

*APs allocated time on their timetable to support the leadership of the school.*

*Principal carrying a lot and often has to deal with extra despite very good people being in AP roles as Year Heads etc. - they are in class when parents etc. are trying to contact them. Guidance provision increased. Smaller schools where DP is not 1 WTE - means DP in classroom part of the time. Smaller schools also hit by lower AP ratio, so they are doubly hit. DP needs to be WTE.*

*Increase DP and AP allocations. Centralise social services within schools of most need. Allow schools/teachers to use Croke Park hours in a discretionary fashion for their own development.*

*I am a Deputy principal, only recognised as .5 from the DE, at the lower end of the pay scale. Despite this inequality, I am expected to work equally as hard or more than an equivalent Deputy Principal in a larger school who is fully recognised by the DE and is on significantly higher wages. would love to achieve recognition of all the work that I do.*

*Let all Deputy Principals be non-teaching, especially those in a school with only one deputy. Reduced hours to Assistant Principals in Voluntary Secondary schools, in line with other sectors.*

*All school should have a second Deputy Principal.*

*Restore the relationships with schools. Acknowledge that there is a severe deficit in terms of facilities in schools in terms of coping with demands of a pandemic. Pupil teacher ratio needs to be examined to reduce class sizes. Principals need to be remunerated for the actual hours that we put in. At the current rate compared to our output, we are barely hitting minimum wage. Additional middle management supports. Schools mid 560-700 need either additional AP1 or lower the threshold for second deputy. We are schools that are hardest hit with not having people to distribute the load of management.*

#### 7.3.5.2 Investment in Technology

The need for investment in technology was mentioned by the majority of respondents. They want to build on the integration of technology in their schools and upskill their school community. This investment is needed in both hardware and in support and professional development.

*Harness the skills that teachers have acquired. Invest in ICT infrastructure to support students and staff in future. Continue to support teachers in promoting the use of their own professional judgement when deciding what is best for their students.*

*More resources for IT. Time for teachers to up skill.*

*Encouraging continued blended and hybrid learning to further enhance education into the future. Supports and training must be available.*

*Complete the review of Senior Cycle asap!! Explore the option of remote learning at certain times of the year e.g., January is a bleak month for people travelling. It also is a month where there is a higher rate of sickness in schools. If remote learning was available up until the February midterm, this would be a great thing in my opinion. More investment needed in IT. IT is the way forward and a lot of progress has been made in the past year in schools. Let's take it further.*

*Adequate investment, both time and money in ICT equipment and training for all so that school closures in future can just move to online classes instead. Investment for 'aides' for the running of additional duties so that everything doesn't always fall on the lap of the principal.*

*Developing online learning platforms.*

*Investment in IT for schools. Speed up the review of the Senior Cycle. Don't introduce new initiatives for at least 3 years to allow schools recalibrate after the pandemic.*

*IT support for schools with a Co-Ordinator post or time allocation. Perhaps regional IT support that provides direct hands on support for school and teachers.*

*Keep the huge advances made in IT - funding needed. Keep Digital Strategies budgets to facilitate this. A need for increased Guidance hours when schools reopen fully to deal with the fallout of the lockdowns.*

*Teachers need to get more time and support to learn and work with Digital Technology. School needs to get advisory visits from School Technology experts to advice on future directions and the pit falls of current systems.*

*There needs to be a complete mindset change as to what education looks like in the 21st Century. The technology in schools is way below what is expected. Staff are buying devices to work. Funding must be provided for all staff in a school community to work on the same device. This device would belong to the DES but controlled by the school. They would then be returned if a teacher left and would be updated every 3-4 years.*

*Making a specific platform universal for all schools such as TEAMS. Funding the purchase of Laptops for all educational staff country wide to allow for more flexibility and gives Principals more support when requesting staff involvement.*

*Direct engagement with broadband providers and phone companies to provide data packages without commitment from the users (students).*

*Making ICT a priority. The Covid-19 teaching supports and allocation should be maintained for a few years to give extra to the students while they readjust and catch up.*

*Also, more investment in digital learning for all students- equal access to IT for all- not just the privileged.*

*Reducing class size numbers - Improve infrastructure - bigger sized classrooms- ventilation - address the inequalities of school facilities - More resources and time allocation for subjects like ICT and PE - Allowances/ tax breaks for teachers and families to buy digital devices*

*More funding for schools to better equip IT resources for new ways of teaching and learning - many of the online elements will continue to remain in place after the pandemic!*

#### 7.3.5.3 Investment in physical structures and staffing

The investment called for here is in smaller class sizes, better buildings and more support staff.

*Smaller classes. Build bigger classrooms. Better IT infrastructure.*

*National high speed broadband essential. This is the biggest creator of a digital divide. Streamlined assessment. Choice, as in the case of the LC is a disaster. One learning platform to go with Google or Microsoft as in Third Level e.g., SchoolWise currently tailored to the Irish Education system.*

*Additional teaching resources and funding for schools.*

*Increase staffing allocations - especially around AEN Reduce pupil - teacher ratios Reduce pupil requirement for 2nd deputy to 600 pupils for all schools. Improve funding to schools in general. Work to make teaching a more attractive career and support the profession by helping to raise its standing in society.*



*Allowing greater flexibility to schools in terms of staffing for the next year or two. Covid-19 allocation cannot just be removed in one go as classes that have been split may well have to stay that way for a while. Also, redeployment should have been paused for this year. It has created unnecessary stress for all members of the school community at a time when people are already stretched.*

*Investment in education; digital infrastructure, class size.*

*Break link between LC and advancement to third level. Stop announcing 1000 pupil schools when no site has been identified. Entire generations of school children will have been educated in homeless schools. Provide real, tangible, supports (psychologists, OT etc.) to schools who need them.*

*Every student in the country should be given a device the minute that they start in post primary school, or at least DEIS students. Delivering devices and dongles is not only dangerous at the moment but time consuming, a huge amount of money and difficult to organise. Once we're back in school, they will need to be returned and then they will not be able to engage with online learning platforms again. Children's' back to school grants that are presently given to parents of DEIS students are not being used appropriately and we all know that. They should be given to the schools and this type of thing done with them instead. We are still buying uniforms and not receiving levies despite the grant. We could instead buy the uniform, books and a laptop.*

*Flexibility for Croke park hours to be done remotely. Senior Management should be able to work remotely from home at end of school day when students have left. Remote working for SMT during June exams. (Rotate days so one is in schools to support exam aide). Work life balance for all needs to be adjusted post pandemic to retain the good aspects of remote work. More qualified subs available- Review the teaching Councils registration requirements to create a supply of teachers. Parental leave contracts so unattractive to subs due to no sick pay or holiday pay or personal leave. Hard to fill vacancies. Critical shortage of language teachers.( Can we sustain Gaeilge as a core subject). Continue the grants for sanitisers etc. for disease control. Laptops for teachers! Even partial grants for teachers to support their purchase. Staff wellbeing on the agenda for the DES- OT (MEDMARK) should continue to provide*

*accessible supports including mindfulness, yoga, meditation on top of the counselling service for all. Reduce pupil teacher ratio so classes are not crowded into small spaces.*

In conclusion, this section where leaders advise on the future of education present some very interesting key findings. Leaders are calling for assessment reform especially at senior cycle. Leaders can see the advantage of the embedding of technology into teaching, learning and assessment but are calling for investment in this area going forward to build on the skills developed during distance education by teachers and students. They want to collaborate with the DE on the future of education and have some insightful ideas on where investment is needed in the coming years.

#### 7.4 Required supports

Our leader need support in the areas presented in Figure 13. Many mention the need for a union to represent leaders and this was mentioned in other data collected via this questionnaire. One respondent said: “Principals need their own union immediately. We need to be at the tables where decisions are made. Not handed down the decisions”. They also asked for support for their mental health “More counsellors for the mental health fall out” from their role. As one commented “There is a presumption that we will just continue emptying our respective tanks, regardless of what is presented to us”. The following quotes present a flavour of the responses in this section.

*Principals require acknowledgement that extends beyond lip service. All DES sections need to reply to communications, applications etc. promptly. The DES needs to consult directly with Principals - there has been no consultation regarding the arrangements that are now being put in place for the remainder of the school year. While management bodies have been involved in discussions, I think that it would be appropriate recognition if those who are to implement the plans were asked their opinions. This also happened last year and, without ongoing communication with Principals, there is no way that anyone can know what exactly is happening at school level and at what cost to Principals' wellbeing. While not in the slightest bit interested in or motivated by money myself, it was reflective of the esteem that Principals are held in that everyone involved in Leaving Cert 2020 and Calculated Grades 2020 was generously remunerated for their efforts. Meanwhile, the Principals*

*who were working consecutive 80-100 hour weeks, one after the other across months, fulfilling their responsibilities in the process and overseeing and ensuring that everything ran as smoothly as it did, weren't even acknowledged. We know what we did and the personal toll that it took on us but, it seems, no one else does or is even interested. There is a presumption that we will just continue emptying our respective tanks, regardless of what is presented to us. We are not treated as the professional school leaders that we are.*

*A full Deputy principal. Agreed leave arrangements, more guidance on support when admin staff sick - need pool of secretarial and SNA supports. An allowance for BOM work. An inspectorate that provides 360 triangulation in the DES departments in supporting schools. The DES to create a boundary around incentives that keep landing on schools, curriculum and initiative overload with no identification of reducing or removing them following rigorous examination of their benefits. Personnel and support with school finances.*

*DES/SEC to produce a document AND a summary PowerPoint/video with main points to aid school leaders in communication. Lead in time between decisions and action required at school level. Calendar for school leaders that ring fences important seminar dates and supports e.g., NAPD conference, JCT leadership events, etc.*

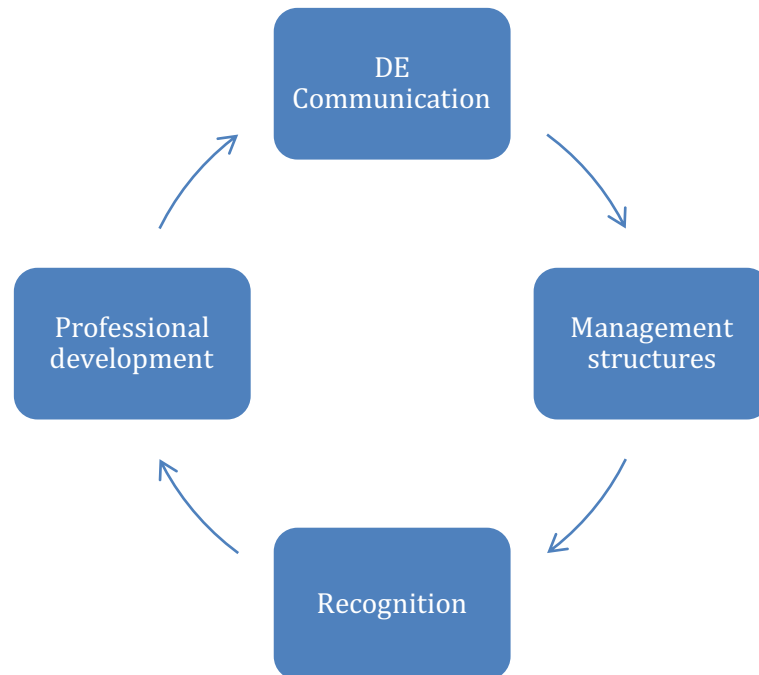
*Moral Leadership as explained previously, everything starts form here. An acknowledgment that the DES got lots of things wrong, not another hollow "I appreciate all the work you are doing" - this is not just relating to the Minister but the Leadership in the DES including the General Secretary and the 9 Assistant General Secretaries A resetting / a new model of relationship with Principals whereby the reality of us all having 2 ears and 1 mouth is lived, whereby the DES listen twice as much as they talk. If this does not happen, then any future relationship is all the poorer - regrettably. There is much ground to be made up by the DES in their relationship with Principals, who across the country have been nothing short of heroic and self-less.*

*We require that the supports that the govt recognises are necessary for schools will also be applied to fee-charging schools. We are not the UK or USA. the fees charged here do not lead to a slush-fund. Anyone who thinks so has never looked at school accounts. Do not kill the school leadership in any sector (fee-charging and free scheme); you have already asked too much of us; what we do, we have done for our children. It is not sustainable. The absolute minimum is a summer break, with absolutely NO communication to schools nor to the public that inevitably forces school management back into work.*

*If the Dept could perhaps think ahead the way all school leaders do and stop reacting to situations. We plan the whole school year in advance, yet they did not even begin to contemplate real contingency plans for Covid-19 until the numbers spike in December. Surely, they could have begun these conversations last September. School leaders also need more stringent support from the NAPD- we don't get the same kind of support from unions that teachers receive, and the NAPD just seems to be toothless really. Real and meaningful IT support would help- schools are expected to manage this from their teaching staff via either the post system or perhaps learning support hours if we are honest. The Dept needs to take an entirely different approach to this. We have over 100 teachers and 1200 students- if this was a company you would have an entire IT department, you would not be relying on the good graces of one or two individuals to try to troubleshoot issues when they arise for people. The dept should provide for a fulltime IT technician/ engineer per school, based in the school. This should not be a teacher- if they wanted to work in IT support, they would not have become teachers! We often talk about Wellbeing for school leaders, and rather than the airy fairy deep breathing practices, I know all I really need is time off or time away- if that could be facilitated that would be amazing! The conferences kind of offer this, but obviously these haven't gone ahead as they normally would this year. I know that they have been online, but most of the school leaders I know look forward to those events as it is a chance to get away, have a coffee or whatever with a fellow DP or principal and let off some steam. We can't do this in school, for so many reasons! I apologise that this has turned into a bit of a rant, but really everything that has been achieved in the reopening of schools in the last year is purely down to the planning and innovation of school leaders and the support we have had from our fantastic teachers, students and parents. Unfortunately, the Dept of Ed have only ever*

*added to the stress and confusion, and it should be the reverse. Will they even sit and discuss your findings of this survey with you? I'd be very interested to see that conversation. They are perhaps too far removed from the reality of school life and have lost their critical distance. Thank you.*

Figure 14. Supports needed.



#### 7.4.1 Support from the Department of Education

The support needed from the DE is in the form of clear communication and consultation.

*More information re decisions before they start leaking to the media. Some sense that there is a plan A, B and C rather than that decisions are being made 'on the hoof'. A sense that the Minister is acting on educational and health advice, rather than for political ends.*

*Clear guidelines that don't constantly change!*

*Please send clear, unambiguous communication to school leaders before the media. We are fielding questions from students, parents and teachers without clear information from Government.*

*Quality and timely information. I would like to know before it appears on social media platforms and on the RTE news. Please show us some respect and acknowledge our positions. We are on the back foot because of this all the time.*

*Clear structures of communication that includes the school. All the information available to the school in a timely manner to make a decision. Not going back on decisions made e.g., bringing back LC students in January.*

*A Department of Education that can function during a crisis and an Inspectorate that can support schools rather than waste their time. More consultation needed with those that do the job day to day rather than so-called experts that haven't seen the inside of a school for quite a time.*

*All DES communication to be before Wednesday. The end of DES leaks to the media or better still a ban on public health grounds regarding state exams. They serve no purpose other than damaging students/staff mental health and increasing newspaper advertising.*

*Need for substitute teacher panel. The sense of being respected by the DES, Inspectorate and government. Their actions throughout the pandemic have been very disheartening at times throughout the pandemic - issuing of information late on Friday evenings; information given to media outlets rather than principals and schools etc.*

*I would appreciate it if the Department could give us at least a week in which to prepare for reopening, sharing of Accredited Grades etc. It is embarrassing when I still need to advise staff, students and parents that I still don't have clear answers for them on this year's Leaving Cert.*

*Effective and timely communication from the DES. The various bodies involved in education, NCCA, DES and inspectorate to work together rather than trying to protect their own sphere. Recognition that principals are at breaking point and proper resourcing of schools. No cutbacks in budget or allocations. Increased SEN allocation.*

*Hard to know what would help! I feel it's a case of 'it is what it is!'. More structured planning documentation and more clarity in some decisions - E.g., SEC to give better guidance on LC exam structure.*

#### 7.4.2 Middle Management and Distributive Leadership Structures

This theme has been highlighted in other parts of this research such as how to make the position more attractive in section 7.2.

*Radical review and reorganisation of management structures in schools. I was a member of senior management a school in the UK which was far more efficient. It is totally unrealistic to have 1 principal with so many direct reports to them and responsibilities on their shoulders.*

*Extra DP positions Reform of an over engineered middle management system which hasn't worked. It just adds to Principal workload without creating an effective middle-management structure.*

*Increased allocation, increased S and S funding. The change to the DEIS schools for DP is pure tokenism; most DEIS schools do not have 600+.*

*More middle management positions in schools, many of those appointed under old system are unable to do roles and responsibilities of modern schools. Teaching hour reduction for middle management.*

*More AP posts, BOM allowance reinstated.*

*DEIS schools require an extra DP regardless of size. Increased posts of responsibility- it's just too much for small team. Devices for all students. Complete overhaul of senior cycle.*

*Distributed leadership CPD for Management team. Coaching for Management team to have a safe place to discuss strengths and weakness of the team and draw up an action plan.*

*That schools be allocated Deputy Principals based on numbers like the allocation of teachers to Schools (i.e., A school with 700 pupils has 2 Deputy Principals and a school with 900 has 3 but a school with 699 has only 1 Deputy Principal. This is a deeply unfair and flawed system as 2 Deputy Principals in schools or even 1.5 Deputy's would have enormous benefits for each and every school. They could take on and accomplish far more tasks. 2. The DES to realise that schools today are extremely busy and demanding places and that they allow sufficient time for schools to implement new initiatives before "rolling out another".*

*Middle leaders - culture shift to recognise they have responsibility to lead people too.*

The need for more administrative support is highlighted by many respondents.

*A secretary to help with the workload.*

*NAPD to be a voice for school leaders - especially at consultation stage of decision making. Admin staff - much of my work is admin which takes away from leading learning.*

*Extra administration posts (non-teaching deputies, funded secretarial posts, etc.)*

*Better timed communication. More support with administration - the DES should be looking at cluster administrators that would work with groups of schools on matters such as health and safety, risk assessments, building issues so that I can get on with the role of Principal which I signed up for - leading teaching and learning.*

*Admin person beyond secretarial level to do Plant management, HR contracts etc. , health and Safety, checklists re compliance.*

#### 7.4.3 Recognition for the Work of Leading a School

Many respondents feel undervalued in the system and are asking for recognition.

*Recognition by the Department of the job Principals are doing.*



*For the Dept to take into consideration the pressure on school management at present. Only for NAPD and ACCS support, I would have found it very difficult to continue in my position.*

*More time less teaching. Acknowledgement and recognition of the fact that Principals and Deputies have had only 1 or 2 weeks holidays last summer in an effort to reopen schools.*

*I think that even the recognition that there was so much hard work involved was good. I just need things to go back to normal so we can meet our colleagues again and have proper conversations. We just need to ride the storm.*

*An extra deputy principal even though we are not a 600 student school. Solid communication channels and appreciation and remuneration for this taking over our lives which it has done this entire year. We have been working from home with no facilities either. What was once an enjoyable job is no longer. It is now too stressful, time consuming and invasive of our lives.*

*Overall greater acknowledgement of the role deputies play. Secretarial support. Many of the wellbeing programmes are inaccessible due to supervision etc. Recording of same or even a Saturday session if it was good.*

Part of this need for recognition is that there is a struggle for leaders to achieve a work life balance with school encroaching on their family time.

*work boundaries and perhaps a definitive job description for the role? this is non-existent - there are no boundaries!*

*Management need to have specific time off for holidays, we don't know when we will be called on. We cannot book holidays etc. anymore.*

*More time. The workload on management is huge. The fact that am teaching adds 10 hours plus to my management duties with class preparation, corrections and feedback. Allocations should allow for more time to be given to AP holders.*

#### 7.4.4 Professional Development Opportunities

Leaders are looking for opportunities to meet other leaders and to learn together. This networking is very important for PD.

*Ongoing CPD for Principals that can bring them together in an organised way with Principals of other post-Primary schools. This should be led by the DES in conjunction with the NAPD. Off-site days 3 times per year.*

*I'd like the working time act to apply to my work so that I can enjoy a long and productive career in this job that I care very much about. I rely on the supports of my Deputy Principal groups to help me out - these networks are invaluable.*

*Leadership CPD - managing change and people.*

*I think our management body (ETBI) need to be more proactive and provide info sessions as other management bodies do around various topics.*

They are looking for time to work with staff on professional development.

*Support to give staff adequate time for training without expecting it to be done outside school time.*

Coaching by the CSL is mentioned by leaders as a valuable experience.

*Coaching by CSL was excellent in the past and should be provided on a continuing basis for all management in schools. Links with other school leaders would be beneficial.*

*CSL Coaching should be extended to all senior management indefinitely. I found it great, and it reduced my stress levels incredibly. I felt supported and heard. Now, I talk to the wall because my 18 months of coaching is up!*

Support for technology training is asked for by respondents.

*Access to more school devices and SIM cards for students without Wi-Fi in their homes. Training in IT. Proper broadband in the rural areas. Our school is rural based.*

*The whole area of IT support in schools needs some serious investment from the DES and I am not talking about giving money, more so the DES allowing schools to employ a person to carry out IT support in schools, as this job alone in schools is now an everyday necessity and yet principals, deputies, teachers etc. who never got training in it, have to sort out these things.*

In conclusion, the supports being asked for by leaders are not too demanding and involve the DE communicating and consulting with leaders, developing more robust distributive leadership structures, recognition for the work our second level school leaders do and providing professional development that is accessible to all.

## 7.5 Conclusion

Half of the respondents will have seen themselves in their current role five years from now. The remainder are either planning to retire, intend to leave or were not yet sure as to what they would do. To ensure the leadership sustainability, leaders asked that their role would be better defined and that middle managers would be appointed in all schools. They asked for help with administration so that they have more time for the important things, such as leading teaching and learning. They wanted to have more work-life balance and time to do some continuous professional development. Leaders have also requested more recognition for the work they did. Finally, the respondents provided a detailed picture of what they believed needs to happen to improve Education post-Covid. This included the assessment reform, Leaving Certificate reform, Junior Cycle reform and significant changes in curriculum, teaching and learning.

## 8. Summary

The current study aimed to identify the differences in post-primary leaders' wellbeing one month before the Covid-19-related school closure and a year later. The findings indicated that whilst no differences were found in participants' personal wellbeing, some aspects of their work-related wellbeing have improved during the pandemic. The maintenance of participants' personal wellbeing and increase in their work-related wellbeing may be due to various factors. Firstly, given that the vast majority of the respondents were male, men's wellbeing was less affected during the pandemic than females' (Hoyt et al., 2021) which may explain why their wellbeing was maintained post-pandemic. Secondly, half of the participants have been in their position for over 5 years. Considering that adaptation and performing the same duties every day creates boredom at work, which is associated with lower levels of wellbeing (Loukidou, Loan - Clarke, & Daniels, 2009), the challenge of the pandemic may have reduced leaders' boredom, enhanced their engagement at work as well positively affected other aspects of their work-related wellbeing. Thirdly, given that factors such as higher education and psychological flexibility are related to increased levels of wellbeing during the pandemic (Gloster et al., 2020), it is possible that post-primary leaders' wellbeing has been protected from decline due to their personal characteristics. Finally, the timing of the research matters. It is unknown as to the initial impact of the lockdown and associated with it changes on leaders' wellbeing. The swift adaptation to changed circumstances, as well as personal resilience of leaders may have impacted on the apparent bounce-back effect of their wellbeing. Further research is required to understand the long-term effect of Covid-19 on school leaders' wellbeing.

Despite their wellbeing levels being maintained, leaders' perceived stress levels were significantly higher than before Covid-19 outbreak. This may be due to the additional tasks that Covid-19 created. The Covid-19-related tasks that the majority of leaders found stressful included looking after at-risk students, managing social distancing measures, managing movement and staffing. While the burden of these tasks will decline with the restrictions being systematically eased down by the government, the devastation of the pandemic may impact on the school community long-term. Further research needs to be carried out to monitor and understand the implications of this extended remote learning on education.

As in earlier research with primary school leaders (Burke and Dempsey, 2020; Dempsey and Burke, 2021; Burke and Dempsey 2021) the challenge of communication with policy bodies in particular the Department of Education are highlighted in this research. Leaders are asking for timely, clear and concise communication. They are acting as knowledge brokers in working with their school communities and they need to have time and clear information to carry out this role successfully without added stress. In addition, leaders are asking to be consulted on key decisions. During the pandemic they did not feel they were part of the decision-making process, and this impacted on their sense of professionalism.

A key message from this research is the need to build on the skills developed by all stakeholders during the school closures and subsequent distance education. To support this there is a need to resource technology at schools and for students. Blended learning is mentioned by many and there will be a need to provide professional development for leaders as they implement this kind of learning in their schools.

Finally, the current research has given voice to leaders who shared their practice-informed suite of recommendations for future change. This included the urgent need for assessment reforms, Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle reforms and significant changes to the curriculum and other aspects of post-primary school lives. The pandemic has unveiled the cracks in the system that should not be just barely filled in to provide a temporary fix. This is an opportunity for all stakeholders to reimagine and rebuild education on the solid foundations of what has already worked, during this crisis time and how we can use the strength of the community and the existing processes to improve it further. Unless a concerted effort is made to lead this change, the future might not be as bright for the Irish education system.

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